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SIMENON

MAIGRET'S FAILURE



Maigret's Failure

by Georges Simenon

**Un échec de Maigret - The 49th Maigret
Novel - translated by Daphne Woodward**

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I

THE OLD LADY OF

KILBURN LANE

AND THE BUTCHER NEAR THE PARC MONCEAU

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Joseph, the office messenger, tapped on the door as lightly as a scurrying mouse. The door did not creak as he pushed it open, and he slid into Maigret's office so quietly that—with his bald head surrounded by its almost ethereal halo of white hair—he might have been playing at ghosts.

The Superintendent sat bending over his files, his teeth clenched on the stem of his pipe; he did not look up, and Joseph stood there, motionless.

For a week now Maigret had been extremely touchy, and his assistants walked on tiptoe when they entered his room. In this he was not alone in Paris, or in France as a whole, for never had there been such a damp, cold and gloomy month of March.

At eleven o'clock in the morning, the murky light of a hangman's dawn still lay over the offices; the lamps were still burning at noon, and dusk came down at three o'clock. One could no longer say it was raining; one was actually living in a cloud, with water everywhere, trails of it on the floors, and no one able to utter three words without blowing his nose.

The papers carried photos of suburban dwellers going home by boat along streets that had turned into watercourses.

Arriving that morning, the Superintendent inquired:

'Is Janvier here?'

'He's ill.'

'Lucas?'

'His wife rang up to say that...'

The inspectors were going down one after another, sometimes in whole batches, so that never more than a third of the team was on hand.

Madame Maigret hadn't got 'flu. Her trouble was toothache. Every night, in spite of the dentist's efforts, it came on towards two or three o'clock, and she didn't get another wink of sleep till dawn.

She was brave and never complained, never let out a moan.

It was worse than that. Suddenly, in the midst of his own sleep, Maigret would realize she was awake. He could feel she was restraining her complaints so hard that she hardly dared to breathe. For a time he would say nothing, lie keeping watch, as it were, over her suffering; then he would be unable to resist muttering:

'Why don't you take an aspirin?'

'Weren't you asleep?'

'No. Take an aspirin.'

'But you know they have no effect any more.'

'Take one all the same.'

He would get up and go barefoot to fetch the box and bring her a glass of water, trying in vain to hide a weariness that verged on ill humour.

'I'm so sorry,' she would sigh.

'It's not your fault.'

'I could go and sleep in the servant's room.'

They had one on the sixth floor, which was hardly ever used.

'Let me go and sleep up there.'

'No.'

'Tomorrow you'll be tired, and you have so much to do.'

He had more worries than actual work. For this was the moment when Mrs. Muriel Britt, the old Englishwoman all the papers were talking about, had chosen to disappear.

Women disappear every day, and it usually happens quietly; they may be found or they may not, but it's not worth more than three lines in the papers, at most.

Muriel Britt's disappearance had made a great stir, for she had come to Paris with fifty-two other people, a whole coachful, one of those herds that travel agencies assemble in England, America, Canada or elsewhere and take the rounds of Paris for a mere song.

It was the very evening the group had 'done' Paris by night. The mixed company—nearly all middle-aged men and women—had been taken by motor-coach to the Central Market, the Place Pigalle, the Rue de Lappe and the Champs-Élysées, their tickets covering the cost of a drink at each establishment they visited.

Towards the end, they had all been very gay, many of them with flushed cheeks and bright eyes. A little man with a waxed moustache, a clerk in the City, had been lost before the final stop; but he was found the following afternoon in his own bed, to which he had discreetly withdrawn.

Mrs. Britt was a different matter. The English papers pointed out that she had no reason to vanish. She was fifty eight years old, thin and stringy, with the tired face and body of a woman who had worked all her life; she ran a boarding-house in

Kilburn Lane

somewhere in West London.

Maigret had no idea what

Kilburn Lane

might be like, judging by the press photographs he imagined a melancholic house where typists and junior clerks lodged and assembled at a round table at mealtimes.

Mrs. Britt was a widow. She had a son in South Africa and a married daughter living somewhere along the Suez Canal. Stress was laid on the fact that this was the first real holiday the poor woman had taken in her life.

A visit to Paris, of course. With a party. At an all-in-price. She was staying with the others at a hotel near the Gare Saint-Lazare which specialized in tours of this kind.

She had got out of the bus with the rest of the party and gone up to her room. Three witnesses had heard her shut the door.

The next morning she was not there, and no trace of her had since been found.

A sergeant from the Yard had arrived, looking embarrassed, and after contacting Maigret had begun to make tactful inquiries on his own.

The English papers, less tactful, were proclaiming the French police were inefficient.

The fact was that there were a few details Maigret felt reluctant to let out to the Press. For one thing, bottles of spirits had been found hidden all over Mrs. Britt's room—under the mattress, under the clothes in a drawer, and even on top of the wardrobe,

For another thing, no sooner had her photograph appeared in an evening paper, than the grocer who had sold her bottles had come to the Quai des Orfèvres.

‘Did you notice anything special about her?’

Well ... She was half-seas over ... Though water wasn't in her line ... To judge by what she bought from me, it was gin she usually drank ...’

Had Mrs. Britt already been a copious secret drinker at the

Kilburn Lane

boarding-house? The English papers carefully avoided any mention of that.

The night porter at the hotel had also made a statement:

‘I saw her come creeping downstairs again. She was a bit tight and she tried to flirt with me.’

Then she went out?’

‘Yes.’

‘Which way did she go?’

‘I don’t know.’

A policeman had seen her hesitating to go into a bar in the Rue d’Amsterdam.

That was all. Nobody had been fished out of the Seine. No dismembered woman had been found on a plot of waste ground.

Superintendent Pike, of the Yard, whom Maigret knew quite well, telephoned from London every morning.

‘Sorry, Maigret; still no clue?’

What with this, the rain, wet clothes, umbrellas dripping in every corner and Madame Maigret’s teeth into the bargain, things were pretty unpleasant and one could feel that the Superintendent would jump at any excuse for an outburst.

‘What is it, Joseph?’

‘The Chief would like a word with you, Superintendent.’

‘I’ll go along at once.’

This was not the time for the report. When the head of the Judicial Police sent for Maigret during the day, something important was generally afoot.

All the same he finished looking through a file and filled a fresh pipe before going to the Chief’s office.

‘Still nothing, Maigret?’

He merely shrugged his shoulders.

‘I’ve just received a letter from the Minister, sent by messenger.’

When anyone said ‘the Minister’ with no further indication, it meant the Minister of the Interior, to whom the Judicial Police are responsible.

‘Saying what?’

‘There’s a fellow coming here at half past eleven ...’

It was now a quarter past.

‘... Chap called Fumal, who seems to be a big shot in his own circle. At the last election he subscribed I don’t know how many million francs to the party funds... .’

‘What’s his daughter done?’

‘He hasn’t got a daughter.’

‘His son, then?’

‘No son, either. The Minister doesn’t tell me what it’s all about. It just appears that this gentleman wants to speak to you personally and that everything must be done to meet his wishes.’

Maigret’s lips moved, and it was easy to guess that the word he did not utter began with the letters sh.

‘I apologize, old man. And I realize it’s bound to be a bore. But do try your damndest. We’ve had enough bothers just lately.’

Maigret paused beside Joseph in the anteroom.

‘When this Fumal arrives, show him straight in to my office.’

This what?’

‘Fumal! That’s his name.’

A name, incidentally, that reminded him of something. Curiously enough he could have sworn it was something unpleasant, but he had enough annoyances already, without racking his memory for more.

‘Is Aillevard here?’ he asked, at the door of the inspectors’ office.

‘He hasn’t come in this morning.’

‘Is he ill?’

‘He hasn’t telephoned.’

Janvier was back at work, still with a red nose and a pasty complexion.

‘How are the kids?’

‘All got ‘flu, of course!’

Five minutes later came another light tap on the office door, and Joseph, with the air of uttering a rather rude word, announced:

‘Monsieur Fumal.’

‘Sit down,’ growled Maigret, without looking at his visitor.

Then he glanced up, to discover a huge, flabby individual who could hardly squeeze into the armchair. Fumal was staring quizzically at the Superintendent, as though expecting a certain definite reaction.

‘What have you come about? I was told you wanted to speak to me personally.’

There were only a few drops of rain on the visitor’s overcoat; he must have arrived by car.

‘Don’t you recognize me?’

‘No.’

‘Think.’

‘I haven’t time.’

‘Ferdinand.’

‘Ferdinand who?’

‘Fattie Ferdinand... . Boum-Boum!’

At that, Maigret remembered, and he had been right in thinking, shortly before, that it was an unpleasant memory. It went back a long way, to the village school at Saint-Fiacre, in the Allier Department, where Mademoiselle Chaigné had been schoolmistress.

In those days Maigret’s father was bailiff at the Château de Saint-Fiacre. Ferdinand was the son of the butcher at Les Quatre-Vents, a hamlet a mile or so away.

In every class there is always a boy like him, taller than the others and fatter, with a kind of unhealthy corpulence.

‘Got there, now?’

‘I have.’

What does it feel like, seeing me again? Personally I knew you'd become a cop, because I saw your photo in the papers. We used to be on Christian name terms, by the way.'

We aren't any longer,' said the Superintendent laconically as he knocked out his pipe.

'Just as you like. You've read the Minister's letter?'

'No.'

Weren't you told about it?'

'Yes.'

'Come to think of it we've done pretty well, both of us. In different ways, of course. My father wasn't a bailiff, only a village butcher. I was thrown out of high school at Moulins when I was fourteen ...'

His attitude was definitely aggressive, and this was not only for Maigret's benefit. He was the type of man who would be hard and churlish with everybody, with life in general, with heaven.

'All the same, Oscar said to me today ...'

Oscar was the Minister of the Interior.

'... Go and see Maigret, since he's the fellow you want to see, and he'll put himself entirely at your disposal... . I'll take care he does ...'

The Superintendent did not move an eyelash, he just continued to gaze stolidly into his visitor's face.

'I remember your father well,' Fumal went on. 'He had a sandy moustache, didn't he? He was thin ... narrow-chested. They must have brought off some good schemes, my dad and he ...'

This time Maigret had difficulty in remaining expressionless, for Fumal had touched on a sore point, one of his most painful childhood memories.

Like many country butchers, Fumal's father, Louis, had been a bit

of a cattle-dealer as well. He had even rented some low-lying meadows where he used to fatten his beasts, and little by little he had widened the range of his local activities.

His wife, Ferdinand's mother, was the local beauty; it was said that she never wore drawers, and that she had even declared cynically:

'In the time it takes to pull them off, one might miss a chance.'

Are there shadowy patches like this in everyone's childhood memories?

As bailiff for the local landowner, Evariste Maigret was responsible for selling the estate cattle. For a long time he had refused to do business with Louis Fumal. But one day he changed his mind. Fumal had come to the office, his worn pocket-book stuffed with banknotes, as usual.

Maigret must have been seven or eight years old then, and he hadn't gone to school. It wasn't 'flu, like Janvier's children, it was mumps. His mother was still alive. It was very hot in the kitchen, all grey, with pale water running down the window-panes.

His father had come rushing in, hatless—unusual for him—with tiny raindrops on his moustache, and very excited.

'That dirty dog Fumal...' he had muttered.

What has he done?'

'I didn't notice right away ... when he'd gone I put the money in the safe, then I made a phone call, and it wasn't till after that, that I noticed he'd slipped two banknotes under my tobacco jar ...'

What had been the sum involved? After all these years Maigret hadn't the faintest idea, but he remembered his father's anger and humiliation ...

'I'm going to chase after him ...'

'He drove away in his trap?'

'Yes. I'll catch him up on my bike, and...'

The rest was vague. But after that, Fumal's name had not been mentioned in his home, except in a peculiar tone. The two men never spoke to each other again. There had been another incident, about which Maigret knew even less. Fumal had apparently tried to make the Comte de Saint-Fiacre (it was still the old Comte) suspicious of his bailiff, and the latter had been obliged to defend himself.

‘Well?’

‘Have you heard anything about me, since we were at school?’

There was an implied threat in Ferdinand Fumal's tone now.

‘No.’

‘Do you know the “United Butchers”?’

‘By name.’

This was an extensive chain of butcher's shops—there was one in the Boulevard Voltaire, not far from where Maigret lived—against which the smaller butchers had protested, but in vain.

‘That's me. Hear of “Economic Butchers”?’

Vaguely. Another chain, in the poorer districts and the suburbs.

‘That's me again,’ declared Fumal with a defiant glance. ‘Do you know how many million francs those two are worth?’

‘It doesn't interest me.’

‘I'm also behind “Northern Butchers”, whose head office is at Lille, and “Associated Butchers”, whose head office is in the Rue Rambuteau, here in Paris.’

Eyeing the bulk of the man in his armchair, Maigret almost muttered:

‘That makes a lot of meat!’

But he didn't. He had a hunch that this business was going to be even more bothersome than the disappearance of Mrs. Britt. He loathed Fumal already, and not only because of his father's memory. The man was too cocksure, with an insolent self-confidence that was insulting to ordinary people.

And yet one could sense, below the surface, a kind of uneasiness that might even be panic.

‘Aren’t you wondering why I’ve come here?’

‘No.’

That was the way to exasperate types like this—to confront them with utter calm, with the force of inertia. There was no curiosity, no interest in the Superintendent’s face, and the other man began to lose his temper.

‘Do you realize I’ve enough influence to get a senior official thrown out?’

‘Really?’

‘Even one who thinks he’s important.’

I’m still listening, Monsieur Fumal.’

‘Please note that I came here as a friend.’

‘And so ... ?’

‘You at once adopted an attitude that was ...’

‘Polite, Monsieur Fumal.’

“Very well! As you choose. It was you I asked to see, because I thought that in view of our old friendship ...’

They had never been friends, never played together. In fact, Ferdinand Fumal had never played with anyone, he had always spent the recreation break alone in a corner.

‘Allow me to remind you that I, too, have a lot of work waiting for me.’

‘I’m a busier man than you, and I came to see you all the same. I might have got you to come to one of my offices ...’

What was the good of arguing? It was true that he knew the Minister, had been useful to him—and doubtless to other politicians as well and that the thing might get awkward.

‘You need the police?’

‘Unofficially.’

‘Please explain.’

‘It is understood that what I’m about to tell you will go no further.’

‘Unless you’ve committed a crime ...’

‘I don’t care for jokes.’

Maigret’s patience was exhausted. He got up and went to lean on the chimney-piece, resisting the urge to throw his visitor out

‘Someone wants to kill me.’

Maigret nearly retorted ‘I can understand that.’

But he forced himself to remain impassive.

‘For the last week or so I’ve been receiving anonymous letters, to which I paid no particular attention at first. People in my position can expect to arouse jealousy and sometimes hatred.’

‘Have you the letters with you?’

Fumal pulled out of his pocket a wallet as fat as his father’s had been in the old days.

‘Here is the first of them. I threw away the envelope, not realizing what was in it.’

Maigret took it, and read the pencilled words:

‘You’re going to pop off.’

Without a smile, he laid the paper on his desk. What do the others say?’

This is the second, it came next day. I kept the envelope—as you see from the postmark, it was sent from a Post Office near the Opéra.’ This note, too, was in pencil, in a copybook hand; it said:

‘I’ll have your skin.’

There were others; Fumal passed them over one by one, taking them out of the envelope himself.

‘I can’t read the postmark on this one.’

‘Your days are numbered, dirty dog.’

‘I suppose you’ve no idea who sent them?’

‘Wait. There are seven of them altogether, the last arrived this morning. One was posted in the Boulevard Beaumarchais, another at the Central Post Office in the Rue du Louvre, and the last in the Avenue des Ternes.’

The wording varied.

‘You’ve not got long to live.’

‘Make your will.’

‘Swine.’

The last message was a repetition of the first:

‘You’re going to pop off.’

‘You’ll leave this correspondence with me?’

Maigret had chosen the word correspondence on purpose, not without ironic intention.

‘If it will help you to find out who sent it.’

‘You don’t think it’s a joke?’

‘The people I have to do with are seldom given to joking. Whatever you may think, Maigret, I’m not a man who’s easily scared. After all, one can’t rise to my position without making a number of enemies, and I’ve always despised them.’

‘Why have you come here?’

‘Because it’s my right as a citizen to be given protection. I don’t want to be shot down without even knowing where the shot came from. I spoke to the Minister about it and he told me ...’

‘I know. In short, you’d like to have a discreet watch kept over you.’

‘That seems to be indicated.’

‘And probably you’d like us to find out who wrote the anonymous letters, too?’

‘If possible.’

‘Can you think of anyone in particular?’

‘In particular, no. Except ...’

‘Go ahead.’

‘Please realize I’m not accusing him. He’s a weak man, and though he might be capable of threats he would never dare to carry them out.’

‘Who is it?’

‘A chap called Gaillardin, Roger Gaillardin, of the “Economic Agencies”.’

‘He has reasons for hating you?’

‘I ruined him.’

‘On purpose?’

‘Yes. After warning him that I was going to.’

‘Why?’

‘Because he got in my way. Now his business is in liquidation and I hope to get him sent to prison, because there’s a matter of some cheques as well as the bankruptcy.’

‘Have you his address?’

‘26 Rue François Premier.’

‘Is he a butcher?’

‘Not a professional. He’s a financial adventurer. He finances his adventures with other people’s money. I finance mine with my own. There’s a great difference.’

‘Is he married?’

‘Yes. But it’s not his wife who counts. It’s his mistress; he lives with her.’

‘You know her?’

‘The three of us often went out together.’

‘Are you married, Monsieur Fumal?’

‘Have been for twenty-five years.’

‘Did your wife come with you on these outings?’

‘My wife stopped going out long ago.’

‘She’s an invalid?’

‘If you like. Anyhow, she thinks so.’

‘I’ll make a few notes.’

Maigret sat down and drew a folder and some paper towards him.

‘Your address?’

‘I live in a house of which I am the owner, 58 bis Boulevard de Courcelles, opposite the Parc Monceau.’

‘A good district.’

‘Yes. I have offices in the Rue Rambuteau, near the Central Markets, and others at La Villette, near the slaughter-houses.’

‘I understand.’

‘Not to mention those at Lille and in other towns.’

‘I suppose you employ a large staff?’

‘In the Boulevard de Courcelles I have five servants.’

‘A chauffeur?’

‘I’ve never managed to learn to drive.’

‘A secretary?’

‘I have a private secretary.’

‘In the Boulevard de Courcelles?’

‘She has her own room and an office there, but she goes with me when I visit our different branches.’

‘Young?’

‘I don’t know. Early thirties, I suppose.’

‘Do you sleep with her?’

‘No.’

‘With whom?’

Fumal smiled contemptuously.

‘I was expecting that question. Yes, I have a mistress. I’ve had several. At the moment it’s a girl called Martine Gilloux; I’ve

fixed her up in a flat in the Rue de l'Etoile.'

'Just round the corner from you.'

'Of course.'

Where did you meet her?'

'In a night-club, a year ago. She's even-tempered and hardly ever goes out.'

'I suppose she has no reason to hate you?'

'I suppose the same.'

'Has she a lover?'

'If she has I don't know about it,' he growled, furious. 'Is that all you want?'

'No. Is your wife jealous?'

'To judge by the tact you're displaying, I suppose you'll ask her that.'

'What kind of family does she come from?'

'Butcher's daughter.'

'Fine.'

What's fine?'

'Nothing. I'd like to know more about your immediate surroundings. Do you open your letters yourself?'

'Those that come to the Boulevard de Courcelles.'

'That's your private mail?'

'More or less. The rest is sent to the Rue Rambuteau or La Villette, where the staff deals with it.'

'It isn't your secretary who ...'

'She opens the envelopes and hands them to me.'

'Have you shown her these notes?'

'No.'

Why not?'

'I don't know.'

‘Nor to your wife, either?’

‘No.’

‘To your mistress?’

‘No again. Is that all you want to know?’

‘I suppose you’ll authorize me to go to the Boulevard de Courcelles? Under what pretext?’

That I’ve lodged a complaint because some papers have disappeared.’

‘May I go to your various offices as well?’

‘In the same way.’

‘And to the Rue de l’Etoile?’

‘If you must.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Is that all?’

‘I shall have your house watched, as from this afternoon, but it seems to me it will be more difficult to have you followed as you go about Paris, You use a sedan, I suppose?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you armed?’

‘I don’t carry a gun, but I keep a revolver in my bedside-table.’

‘You and your wife have separate rooms?’

‘For the last ten years.’

Maigret had risen and was looking towards the door, then he glanced at his watch. Fumal stood up, trying in his turn, with some difficulty, to find something to say, and only came out with:

‘I wasn’t expecting you to take this attitude.’

‘Have I been discourteous?’

‘I don’t say that, but ...’

‘I have your matter in hand, Monsieur Fumal. I hope nothing unpleasant will happen to you.’

The big butcher, now out in the corridor, snapped back furiously:

‘I hope not, too. For your sake!’

Whereupon Maigret closed the door, rather violently.

II

THE DISTRUSTFUL SECRETARY AND THE WIFE WHO DOESN'T TRY TO UNDERSTAND

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lucas came in, carrying some documents and smelling like a chemist's shop, and Maigret, who had not yet sat down again at his desk, asked gruffly:

‘Seen him?’

‘Who, Chief?’

‘Fellow who just went out.’

‘I almost collided with him, but I didn't look at him.’

‘You should have. Unless I'm very much mistaken he's going to cause us more trouble than the Englishwoman.’

Maigret had used a stronger word than ‘trouble’. He was not merely glum, but worried, with a weight on his shoulders. It upset him, this emergence from the distant past of a fellow who had always repelled him and whose father had done his own a bad turn.

‘Who is he?’ asked Lucas as he spread his papers out on the desk.

‘Fumal.’

‘The meat man?’

‘You know about him?’

‘My brother-in-law was assistant book-keeper in one of his offices for a couple of years.’

‘What does your brother-in-law think of him?’

‘He gave up the job.’

‘Would you like to deal with the thing?’

Maigret pushed the threatening letters across to Lucas.

‘Show ‘em to Moers first of all, on the off-chance.’

The laboratory people nearly always get something out of a document. Moers knew every type of paper, every kind of ink, probably every make of pencil too. Besides, there might be some known fingerprints on the letters.

‘How are we going to protect him?’ Lucas inquired after reading them.

‘I’ve no idea. Begin by sending someone to the Boulevard de Courcelles—Vacher, for instance.’

‘Into the house, or outside?’

Maigret did not reply immediately.

The rain had just stopped, but things were no better for that. A cold, wet wind had sprung up, forcing the passers-by to cling to their hats, and blowing their clothes hard against them. People on the Pont Saint-Michel were leaning backwards as they walked, as though someone were pushing them.

‘Outside. He’d better take someone with him to make inquiries in the neighbourhood. You yourself might go and take a look into the offices in the Rue Rambuteau and at La Villette.’

‘You think it’s a genuine threat?’

‘On Fumal’s part, at any rate. If we don’t do what he wants he’ll stir up all his political friends.’

‘What does he want?’

‘I’ve no idea.’

This was true. What exactly did this wholesale butcher want? What lay behind his visit?

‘Are you going home for lunch?’

It was past noon. For the last week Maigret had been lunching in the Place Dauphine every other day, not because of his work, but because his wife had a dentist's appointment for half past eleven. And he didn't like eating alone.

Lucas went with him. As usual there were several inspectors standing at the bar, and the two men went into the little back room, where there was an old-fashioned coal stove, something the Superintendent always liked.

'What would you say to a blanquette de veau?' suggested the patron.

'The very thing for me.'

On the steps of the Palais de Justice a woman was struggling desperately to pull down her skirt, which a sudden squall had turned inside-out like an umbrella.

A little later, as the hors d'oeuvres were being served, Maigret said again, as though to himself:

'I don't understand ...'

It is not unusual for lunatics, or semi-lunatics, to write letters of the type Fumal had received. Sometimes they even carry out their threats. They are humble people, and in almost every case they have been brooding over their grievances for a long time, not daring to bring them into the open.

A man like Fumal must have wronged hundreds of people. His arrogance would have wounded others.

What Maigret didn't understand was the nature of his visit, his aggressive way of behaving.

Had Maigret himself begun it? Had he been wrong to show faint signs of a long-standing resentment that went back to the village days at Saint-Fiacre?

'The Yard hasn't telephoned to you today, Chief?'

'Not yet. That'll come.'

They were served with a blanquette de veau— Madame Maigret herself could not have made a creamier sauce—and a moment later the proprietor came to announce that Maigret

was wanted on the telephone. Only the people at the Quai knew where to find him.

‘Yes. Hello? ... Janin? ... What does she want? ... Ask her to wait for a bit... Oh, say a quarter of an hour ... Yes ... In the waiting-room, that’s best...’

As he sat down again he told Lucas:

‘His secretary wants to speak to me. She’s at the Quai.’

‘Did she know her boss was calling on you?’

Maigret shrugged his shoulders and began to eat. He took no cheese or dessert, only a cup of coffee, which he gulped down, boiling hot, as he filled a pipe.

‘Don’t you hurry. Do what I told you, and keep me informed.’

He felt certain he had a cold coming on, too. As he went under the archway of the Judicial Police building the wind whipped away his hat; the constable on duty caught it in the nick of time.

‘Thanks, my boy.’

Reaching the first floor, he looked with curiosity through the glass portion into the waiting-room and saw a young woman, about thirty, fair-haired and with regular features; she sat with hands folded over her bag, waiting with no sign of impatience.

‘Is it you who want to talk to me?’

‘Superintendent Maigret?’

‘Come this way ... Please sit down ...’

He took off his coat and hat, sat down at his desk, and gave her another searching glance. Without waiting for him to question her, she began, in a voice which soon gained confidence, finding its natural tone almost at once:

‘My name is Louise Bourges and I’m the private secretary of Monsieur Fumal.’

‘Since when?’

‘Three years.’

‘I understand you live in the Boulevard de Courcelles, in your employer’s house?’

‘In the ordinary way, yes. But I’ve kept my little flat on the Quai Voltaire.’

‘Yes ...’

‘Monsieur Fumal must have been to see you this morning.’

‘Did he mention it to you?’

‘No. I heard him telephoning to the Minister of the Interior.’

‘In front of you?’

‘I shouldn’t have known about it otherwise; I don’t listen at doors.’

‘It’s that visit you want to see me about?’

She nodded, took her time, choosing her words.

‘Monsieur Fumal doesn’t know I’m here.’

‘Where is he at the moment?’

‘In a big Left Bank restaurant where he has several guests for lunch. He has a business luncheon nearly every day.’

Maigret was neither helping her nor doing anything to put her off. As a matter of fact he was wondering, as he looked at her more closely, why in spite of a good figure and regular, rather pretty features, she lacked charm.

‘I don’t want to waste your time, Superintendent. I don’t know exactly what Monsieur Fumal told you. I imagine he brought you some letters.’

‘You’ve read them?’

‘The first, and at least one other. The first because it was I who opened it, and the other because he left it lying on his desk.’

‘How do you know there have been more than two?’

‘Because I handle all the letters and I recognized that copybook writing and the yellowish envelopes.’

‘Has Monsieur Fumal talked to you about them?’

‘No.’

She hesitated again, though she was not embarrassed in spite of the Superintendent’s fixed stare.

‘I think you ought to know that he wrote them himself.’

Her cheeks were a little pinker now and she seemed relieved to have got past the difficult point.

‘To begin with, because I once caught him writing. I never knock before going into his office. It’s he who wanted it that way. He thought I’d gone out. I’d forgotten something. I went back to the office and saw him writing copybook letters on a sheet of paper.’

‘When was this?’

The day before yesterday.’

‘Did he seem upset?’

‘He covered the sheet of paper with a blotter at once. Yesterday I was wondering where he’d got the paper and envelopes. We have none of that kind in the house, nor in the Rue Rambuteau or any of the other offices. As you will have noticed it’s a cheap kind of paper which is sold in small packets at general stores and in tobacconists’ shops. While he was out I had a look.’

‘Did you find any?’

Opening her bag, she produced a sheet of lined paper and a yellowish envelope, and held them out to him.

Where did you find these?’

‘In a cupboard full of old files that aren’t used any longer.’

‘May I ask, Mademoiselle, why you decided to come and see me?’

She looked faintly abashed for a second, but recovered herself at once and replied in a firm, slightly defiant tone:

‘To protect myself.’

‘From whom?’

‘From him.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Because you don’t know him as well as I do.’

She didn’t suspect that Maigret had known him long before she did!

‘Please explain.’

‘There’s nothing to explain. He does nothing without a reason, you understand? If he’s taking the trouble to write threatening letters to himself, it’s for some purpose. Especially if, afterwards, he gets in touch with the Minister of the Interior and comes to see you.’

Her argument was perfectly convincing.

‘Do you think, Superintendent, that there can be such a thing as a person who’s basically cruel, I mean someone who’s cruel just for the pleasure of it?’

Maigret thought it better not to reply.

‘Well, he’s like that! He employs hundreds of people, directly or indirectly, and he does his utmost to make their lives a misery. He’s shrewd, too. It’s almost impossible to hide anything from him. His managers, who are under-paid, all make some attempt to cheat him, and he delights in surprising them just when they least expect it.

‘In the Rue Rambuteau office there was an old book-keeper he detested, for no reason, but he kept him on for nearly thirty years because he was useful. The man was a kind of slave, he trembled when the boss came near him. His health was bad and he had six or seven children.

When his health got worse, Monsieur Fumal decided to get rid of him without paying him any compensation or showing him any gratitude. Do you know what he did?

‘He went one night to the Rue Rambuteau, where there was a safe to which only he and this book-keeper had keys, and he took some banknotes out of it.

‘Next morning he went to the office and put several of the notes into the pocket of the jacket the book-keeper used to take off and hang up when he arrived—he had an old one for work.

‘Monsieur Fumal had the safe opened, on some excuse. You can guess what happened. The old man cried like a child, fell on his knees. It seems there was a terrible scene, and up to the last moment Monsieur Fumal was threatening to call the police, so when the poor man left he was thanking him.

‘Now do you understand why I wanted to protect myself?’

‘I understand,’ he murmured pensively.

‘I’ve given you only one example. There are others. He does nothing without a motive, and his motives are always unpredictable.’

‘Do you think he’s afraid for his life?’

‘I’m sure he is. He’s always been afraid. It’s because of that—strange as it may seem—that he’s forbidden me to knock on the door. The sound of a sudden knock makes him jump.’

‘From what you say, there must be a number of people with good cause for resentment against him?’

‘A great many, yes.’

‘Pretty well all those who work for him?’

‘And the people he does business with, too. He’s ruined dozens of small butchers who refused to sell their businesses. More recently he ruined Monsieur Gaillardin.’

‘Do you know him?’

‘Yes.’

‘What sort of a man is he?’

‘A very good kind of man. He lives in a beautiful flat in the Rue François Premier with a mistress twenty years younger than himself. He had a flourishing business and lived in a big way until Monsieur Fumal decided to launch “United Butchers”. It’s a long story. They fought for two years and in the end Monsieur Gaillardin had to throw up the sponge.’

‘You do not like your employer?’

‘No, Superintendent.’

‘Why do you go on working for him?’

She blushed for the second time, but was not put off her stride.

‘Because of Felix.’

‘Who is Felix?’

‘The chauffeur.’

‘You are the chauffeur’s mistress?’

‘If you wish to put it crudely, yes. We’re engaged, too, and we shall get married as soon as we’ve saved enough to buy an inn somewhere near Giens.’

‘Why Giens?’

‘Because we both come from there.’

‘Did you know each other before coming to Paris?’

‘No. We met in the Boulevard de Courcelles.’

‘Does Monsieur Fumal know of your plans?’

‘I hope not.’

‘And about the relationship between you?’

‘Knowing him, I should say he probably does. He’s not a man from whom one can hide anything, and I’m certain he has spied on us sometimes. He takes care to say nothing about it. He never does until the moment when it can be useful to him.’

‘I suppose Felix feels about him as you do?’

‘He certainly does.’

The young lady could not be accused of lacking frankness.

‘There is a Madame Fumal, isn’t there?’

‘Yes. They’ve been married a very long time.’

‘What is she like?’

‘What could she be like, with such a husband? He terrorizes her.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘She lives in the house like a shadow. He goes and comes as he pleases, brings friends or business acquaintances home with

him. He takes no more notice of her than if she were a servant, he never takes her to a restaurant or to the theatre, and in the summer he just sends her off to spend her holidays in some lost village in the mountains.'

'Used she to be pretty?'

'No. Her father was one of the biggest butchers in Paris, in the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, and in those days Monsieur Fumal wasn't yet rich.'

'Do you think she's unhappy?'

'Not even that. She's stopped caring about anything. She sleeps, drinks, reads novels and sometimes goes all alone to the nearest cinema.'

'Is she younger than he?'

'Probably, but she doesn't look it.'

'Is that all you have to tell me?'

'Id better go now, so as to be at the house when he gets back.'

'Do you have your meals there?'

'Almost always.'

'With the servants?'

Her cheeks flushed for the third time and she nodded silently.

'Thank you, Mademoiselle. I expect I shall go over there this afternoon.'

'You won't tell him that ...'

'Don't worry.'

'He's so cunning ...'

'So am I!'

He watched her as she walked down the long corridor, until she reached the stairs and vanished from sight.

Why the devil was Ferdinand Fumal sending himself threatening letters and then coming to ask for police protection? One explanation sprang to the mind straight away, but Maigret didn't like explanations that were too simple.

Fumal had a host of enemies. Some of them hated him enough to make an attempt on his life. Perhaps he had recently given someone even greater cause to hate him?

He hadn't the nerve to come to the police and tell them:

'I'm a swine. One of my victims may be meaning to kill me. Protect me.'

He'd chosen the devious method of writing anonymous letters to himself and waving them in the Superintendent's face.

Was that it? Or was one to suppose that Mademoiselle Bourges had been lying?

Feeling slightly uncertain, Maigret went upstairs to the laboratory. Moers was working, and he handed him the sheet of paper and the envelope the secretary had just given him.

'Have you found anything?'

'Finger-prints.'

Whose?'

'Three people's. First those of a man I don't know, who has broad, square-tipped fingers, and then yours and Lucas's.'

'That's all?'

'Yes.'

'This sheet of paper and this envelope are exactly like the others.'

After a brief examination Moers confirmed this.

'I didn't look for prints on the envelopes, of course. There are always a mass of them there, including the postman's.'

When Maigret got back to his office he was tempted to wash his hands of the whole Fumal business. How could he protect a man who went all over Paris, unless he put at least a dozen inspectors on the job?

'The stinker!' he muttered between his teeth now and then.

A call came through about Mrs. Britt. Yet another clue, picked up yesterday, had led nowhere.

‘If anyone asks for me,’ he announced in the inspectors’ office, ‘say I’ll be back in an hour or two.’

Down in the courtyard, he chose one of the black cars.

‘Boulevard de Courcelles. Number 58 bis.’

The rain had begun again. One could see from the faces of the passers-by that they were fed up with splashing about in cold rain and mud.

The house, a detached one built at the end of the last century, was spacious, with a carriage entrance, bars across the downstairs windows, and very tall windows on the first floor. Maigret pressed a brass button and after some delay a manservant in a striped waistcoat opened the door.

‘Monsieur Fumal, please.’

‘He’s not at home.’

‘In that case I will see Madame Fumal.’

‘I don’t know whether Madame can see you.’

Tell her Superintendent Maigret is here.’

The former stables, on the far side of the courtyard, were now used as garages, and two cars could be seen there, which proved that the ex-butcher owned at least three.

‘Will you come this way ...’

A broad staircase with carved banisters led up to the first floor, where two marble statues stood like sentinels. Maigret was requested to wait here, and sat down on an uncomfortable Renaissance chair.

The manservant went up higher and was away for a long time. Whispering could be heard from the floor above. From some other direction came the click of a typewriter—that must be Mademoiselle Bourges at work.

‘Madame will see you directly. She says will you please wait ...’

The man went downstairs again and nearly a quarter of an hour elapsed before a lady’s maid came down from the second

floor.

‘Superintendent Maigret? ... This way, please ...’

The atmosphere was as gloomy as that of the law-courts in a provincial town. There was too much space and not enough life, voices echoed between the walls which were painted to imitate marble.

Maigret was shown into an old-fashioned drawing-room where a grand piano was surrounded by at least fifteen arm-chairs upholstered in faded tapestry. Again he waited for a short time, and at last the door opened to admit a woman in a housecoat: with her expressionless eyes, puffy, colourless face and jet-black hair she gave the effect of an apparition.

‘I’m sorry to have kept you waiting...’

She spoke in a colourless voice, like a sleepwalker.

‘Please sit down. Are you sure it’s I you want to see?’

Louise Bourges had hinted at the truth by mentioning drink, but the truth went beyond the Superintendent’s expectations. This woman’s face, as she sat opposite him, was weary but resigned, without sadness, and she seemed to be utterly remote from real life.

‘Your husband came to see me this morning, and he has reason to believe that someone has designs on his life.’

She did not start, but merely stared at him in mild surprise.

‘Has he told you about it?’

‘He never tells me about anything.’

‘Do you know if he has enemies?’

The words seemed to take a long time to penetrate to her brain, and more time was needed for her reply to take shape there.

‘I suppose he has, don’t you think?’ she murmured at last.

‘Was yours a love marriage?’

This was beyond her understanding and all she said was:

‘I don’t know.’

‘You have no children, Madame Fumal?’

She shook her head.

‘Would your husband have liked to have some?’

Again she replied:

‘I don’t know.’

Then she added indifferently:

‘I suppose so.’

What else could he ask her? It seemed almost impossible to communicate with her, as though she lived in a different world, or as though they were separated by the sound-proof walls of a glass cage.

‘I’m afraid I interrupted your afternoon rest?’

‘No. I don’t have a rest.’

‘Then all that remains is for me ...’

All that remained, in fact, was for him to take his leave, and he was on the point of doing so when the door opened abruptly.

‘What are you doing here?’ Fumal demanded, his eyes harder than ever.

‘As you see, I am making the acquaintance of your wife.’

‘They tell me one of your policemen is downstairs questioning my servants. And I find you up here, pestering my wife, who ...’

‘Just a moment, Monsieur Fumal. It was you who applied to me, was it not?’

‘I didn’t give you the right to interfere in my private life.’

Maigret bowed to the woman, who was watching them without understanding.

‘I beg your pardon, Madame. I hope I have not disturbed you too much.’

The master of the house followed him to the head of the stairs.

‘What did you talk to her about?’

‘I asked her whether she knew if you had enemies.’

‘What did she say?’

‘That you probably had, but that she didn’t know who they were.’

‘Does that get you any further?’

‘No.’

‘Well?’

‘Well, nothing.’

Maigret almost asked him why he had sent anonymous letters to himself, but he felt the moment for that had not yet come.

‘Is there anyone else here to whom you want to put questions?’

‘One of my inspectors is attending to that. You have just told me he’s downstairs. In point of fact, if you really want to be protected, it might be best to let one of our men come with you wherever you go. It’s all very well to watch this house, but when you go to the Rue Rambuteau, or somewhere else ...’

They were going downstairs now. Fumal seemed to reflect, staring at Maigret as though wondering if this were not a trap.

‘When would it begin?’

‘When you like.’

‘Tomorrow morning?’

‘Very well. I’ll send you someone tomorrow morning. What time do you usually go out?’

‘It depends on the day. Tomorrow I’m going up to La Villette at eight o’clock.’

‘There will be an inspector here at half past seven.’

They had heard the front door open and close again. Reaching the first floor, they saw a man coming towards them; he was short and bald, dressed all in black, and carried his hat in his hand. He seemed to be quite at home in the place, and glanced inquiringly at Maigret and then at Fumal.

‘This is Superintendent Maigret, Joseph. I had a little matter to settle with him.’

To the Superintendent, he said:

‘This is Joseph Goldman, my lawyer—my right hand, you might say. Everyone calls him Monsieur Joseph.’

Monsieur Joseph had a black leather briefcase under his arm; he gave a peculiar smile, baring a row of bad teeth.

‘I won’t go down with you, Superintendent. Victor will let you out.’

Victor, the manservant in the striped waistcoat, was waiting at the foot of the stairs.

‘Then it’s agreed for tomorrow morning.’

‘Agreed,’ Maigret echoed.

He could not remember ever having such an impression of helplessness or rather of unreality. Even the house looked unreal! And it seemed to him that the servant, closing the door behind him, wore a mocking smile.

Back at the Quai, he wondered who to send next day to watch over Fumal, and finally chose Lapointe, to whom he gave his instructions.

‘Be there by seven-thirty. Follow him wherever he goes. He’ll take you in his car. He’ll probably try to annoy you.’

‘Why?’

‘Doesn’t matter. Don’t you turn a hair.’

He had to attend to the old Englishwoman, who was now reported to have been seen at Maubeuge. In all probability it wasn’t she. He had lost count of the false alarms, the old Englishwomen who’d been seen all over France.

Vachet rang up to ask for orders.

‘What am I to do? Watch inside the house, or out of doors?’

‘Whichever you like.’

‘It’s pouring, but I’d rather be outside.’

Somebody else who didn't relish the atmosphere of the house in the Boulevard de Courcelles.

'I'll send someone to relieve you towards midnight.'

'That's fine, Chief. Thank you.'

Maigret dined at home. That night his wife was not in pain and he slept right through till half past seven. His usual cup of coffee was brought to him in bed, and his eyes turned straight towards the window; the sky outside was leaden, as it had been for days.

He had just gone into the bathroom when the telephone rang. He heard his wife say:

'Yes ... yes ... One moment, Monsieur Lapointe ...'

This meant disaster. It was at half past seven that Lapointe was to go on duty in the Boulevard de Courcelles. If he was ringing up ...

'Hello ... Maigret here ...'

'Listen, Chief ... Something's happened ...'

'Dead?'

'Yes.'

'How?'

We don't know. Perhaps poisoned. I don't see any wound. I scarcely took time to look. The doctor's not here yet.'

'I'll be right along!'

Had he been mistaken in thinking that Fumal could bring him nothing but ... bothers?

III

THE MANSERVANT'S PAST AND THE THIRD-FLOOR TENANT

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while he was shaving, Maigret's conscience was ill at ease. Perhaps because he had a personal grudge against Fumal? Automatically this made him wonder if he had done his full duty. The man had come to ask for his protection. True, he had been aggressive about it, had himself pushed by the Minister, and his manner towards the Superintendent had been almost openly menacing.

But that did not absolve Maigret from doing his duty. Had he really done it to the very utmost? He had gone to the Boulevard de Courcelles himself, but he had not taken the trouble to inspect all the doors and other ways of access; he had postponed that task till next day, together with the job of interviewing the servants one after another.

He had sent an inspector to mount guard outside the house. From half past seven this morning, if Fumal had not been killed, Lapointe would have been at his side while Lucas pursued his investigations in the Rue Rambuteau and elsewhere.

Would he have acted differently if he hadn't found the man unlikeable, if he had not had an old score to settle with him, if —Fumal had been just any big Paris business man?

Before breakfast, Maigret telephoned to the Public Prosecutor's office and then to the Quai des Orfèvres.

'Aren't you having a car sent round?' inquired Madame Maigret, who made herself as small as possible on such occasions.

'I'll take a taxi.'

The Boulevards were almost empty, with only a few dark figures emerging from the Métro entrances and hurrying into doorways. A car—a doctor's—was standing outside no. 58 bis

Boulevard de Courcelles, and when the Superintendent rang the bell the door opened at once.

The manservant, the same as yesterday, had not had time to shave, but he was already wearing his yellow-and-black striped waistcoat. He had very bushy eyebrows, and Maigret stared at him for a second as though trying to remember something.

‘Where is it?’ he asked.

‘On the first floor, in the study.’

On his way upstairs he made a mental note to look into this Victor later on; the man roused his curiosity. Lapointe came to meet him on the landing, which was doing duty as a waiting-room.

‘I made a mistake, Chief; I’m sorry. The way he was lying when I first saw him, the wound couldn’t be seen.’

‘He wasn’t poisoned?’

‘No. When the doctor turned him over he found a gaping wound in the back, level with the heart. The shot was fired point-blank.’

‘Where’s his wife?’

‘I don’t know. She hasn’t come down.’

‘The secretary?’

‘She must be over there. Come with me. I’m only just beginning to find my way about.’

On the side overlooking the railings of the Parc Monceau was an enormous drawing-room which gave the impression of never being used, and was damp in spite of the central heating.

Along a red-carpeted corridor, on the right, was the outer office, a not very large room looking on to the courtyard. Louise Bourges was there, standing by the window; a maidservant was with her. Neither of them said anything, and Louise Bourges looked anxiously at Maigret, probably wondering what attitude he would adopt towards her after her visit to the Quai des Orfèvres the day before.

‘Where is he?’ was all Maigret asked.

She pointed to a door: ‘There.’

This second office was larger, also red-carpeted, and furnished in the Empire style. A human form was lying near an arm-chair, and a doctor Maigret did not know was kneeling beside it.

‘I’m told it was a shot fired at point-blank range?’

The doctor nodded. The Superintendent had already noted that the dead man was not in pyjamas, but wore the same clothes as the day before.

‘When did it happen?’

‘So far as I can judge at first glance, late in the evening, between eleven and midnight, or thereabouts.’

Involuntarily, Maigret found himself thinking of the village of Saint-Fiacre, the school playground, the fat boy whom nobody liked and who was known as Boum-Boum, or sometimes Jujube.

In turning him over the doctor had laid him in a curious attitude, with one arm outstretched as though pointing to a corner of the room where there was nothing to be seen except a yellowing marble Nymph on a pedestal.

‘I suppose death was instantaneous?’

This was a foolish question, for the wound was so large that a fist could almost have been thrust into it. But the Superintendent was ill at ease. This was no ordinary case.

‘His wife has been told?’

‘I think so.’

Maigret went into the next room and put the same question to the secretary:

‘His wife has been told?’

‘Yes. Noémi went up and told her.’

‘She hasn’t come down?’

He was beginning to realize that nothing happened here in the way it would in a normal household.

‘When did you last see him?’

‘Yesterday evening, about nine o’clock.’

‘He sent for you?’

‘Yes.’

Why?’

‘To dictate some letters. The shorthand notes are on my pad. I haven’t typed them yet.’

‘Important letters?’

‘No more and no less than any others. He often used to dictate in the evening.’

Without her needing to add anything further, Maigret realized what the girl was thinking; it was to annoy her that her employer used to send for her in that way, after the day’s work. Ferdinand Fumal seemed to have spent his life trying to annoy people.

‘Did he have any visitors?’

‘Not while I was here.’

‘Was he expecting anyone?’

‘I think so. He had a telephone call and told me to go to bed.’

‘What time was that?’

‘Half past nine.’

‘Did you go to bed?’

‘Yes.’

‘Alone?’

‘No.’

‘Where is your room?’

‘With the other servants’ rooms, above the old stables that are used as garages nowadays.’

‘Monsieur Fumal and his wife slept alone in the house?’

‘No. Victor sleeps on the ground floor.’

‘That’s the manservant?’

‘He acts as porter too, looks after the house, runs errands.’

‘He’s not married?’

‘No. At least, not so far as I know. He has a little room with a round window looking out under the archway.’

‘Thank you.’

‘What am I to do now?’

‘Wait. When the post comes, bring me the letters. I wonder if there’ll be another anonymous one.’

He had the impression she blushed, but was not certain. Steps were heard on the stairs. The Public Prosecutor’s deputy arrived, with a young magistrate called Planche, with whom Maigret had not worked before. The clerk who followed them had a cold. Almost as soon as they had come in, the front door opened again, to admit the people from the Criminal Records Office.

Louise Bourges remained in her own office, standing by the window, waiting for instructions, and it was to her that Maigret turned once more, a little later.

‘Who told Madame Fumal?’

‘Noémi.’

‘Is that her personal maid?’

‘It’s the one who attends to the second floor. Monsieur Fumal’s bedroom is on this floor, beyond his office.’

‘Go and see what’s happening up there.’

And as she hesitated:

‘What are you afraid of?’

‘Nothing.’

It was strange, to say the least of it, that the dead man’s wife had not come downstairs and that there was no sound from

above.

Since Maigret's arrival Lapointe had been silently ferreting about, looking for a weapon. He had opened the door of the bedroom, which was enormous, and furnished, like the office, in Empire style; the bed was turned down and pyjamas and dressing-gown laid out on it.

Despite the tall windows the atmosphere of the house was grey, and only a few lights had been turned on; the photographers were setting up their cameras here and there, the Public Prosecutor's men were whispering in a corner while they waited for the official pathologist.

'Have you any ideas, Maigret?'

'None at all.'

'Did you know him?'

'I knew him in my village schooldays and he came to see me yesterday. He'd been to the Minister of the Interior to get our protection.'

'Against what?'

'For some time he'd been receiving anonymous threats.'

'Didn't you do anything?'

'An inspector spent the night outside the house and another was going to watch him all day.'

'In any case it looks as though the murderer had taken his gun away with him.'

Lapointe had found nothing. Neither had the others. Maigret, hands in pockets, made for the stairs and went down to the ground floor, where he pressed his nose against the round window he had been told of.

The room inside resembled a porter's lodge, with a tumbled bed, a wardrobe, a gas heater, a table and some book-shelves. The manservant was sitting astride a chair, with his elbows propped on the back of it, staring blankly into space.

The Superintendent tapped softly on the window-pane and the man started, looked at him with a frown, then got up and came

to the door.

“You recognized me?” he asked at once, his face a mixture of fright and suspicion.

The day before, already, Maigret had felt he’d seen the man before somewhere, but he still could not think where.

‘I recognized you at once.’

‘Who are you?’

*You didn’t know me in the old days, because I’m a good bit younger. When I was born you’d already left.’

‘Left where?’

‘Saint-Fiacre, of course! Don’t you remember Nicolas?’

Maigret remembered Nicolas very well. He was an old drunkard who put in a few days’ work here and there on the farms, ran the threshing-machine in summer and rang the church bells on Sundays. He lived in a hut on the edge of the woods and had the peculiarity of eating crows and polecats.

‘He was my father.’

‘He’s dead?’

‘Long ago.’

‘And how long have you been in Paris?’

‘Didn’t you see about it in the papers? After all, they printed photos of me. I got into trouble at home. In the end they realized I hadn’t done it on purpose.’

He had bristly hair and a low forehead.

‘Tell me about it.’

‘I used to go poaching, that’s a fact, and I never denied it.’

‘And you killed a gamekeeper?’

‘You did read about it?’

‘Which gamekeeper?’

‘A young one, you didn’t know him. He was always after me. I swear I didn’t do it on purpose, though. I was watching for a

deer, and when I heard a noise in the bushes ...'

'What made you think of coming here, afterwards?'

'I didn't think of it.'

'Fumal came to fetch you?'

'Yes. He needed a man he could trust. You've never gone back to the district yourself, though they've not forgotten you down there and I can tell you they're proud of you. But as soon as Fumal had some money he bought the Château de Saint-Fiacre ...'

Maigret felt a slight pang in his heart. He'd been born there—only on the estate, of course, but still he had been born there, and for a long time the Comtesse de Saint-Fiacre had been his ideal of womanhood.

'I see,' he growled.

Fumal had always surrounded himself with people he had some hold over, hadn't he? What he needed was not so much a manservant as a kind of bodyguard, a watch-dog, so he had brought back to Paris a young fellow who'd had a narrow escape from the hulks.

'It was he who paid your lawyer?'

'How did you know?'

'Tell me what happened yesterday evening.'

'Nothing happened. Monsieur didn't go out.'

'What time did he get home?'

'A little before eight o'clock, for dinner.'

'Alone?'

'With Mademoiselle Louise.'

'The car was put into the garage?'

'Yes. It's still there. All three of them are there.'

'The secretary has her meals with the servants?'

'She likes to, because of Felix.'

‘Everyone knows about her affair with Felix?’

‘It’s not difficult to see.’

‘Your boss knew, too?’

‘Victor said nothing, and Maigret challenged him:

‘You told him, didn’t you?’

‘He asked me ...’

‘You told him?’

‘Yes.’

‘If I understand correctly, you told him about everything that went on in the servants’ quarters?’

‘He paid me to.’

‘Let’s get back to yesterday evening. You left your lodge?’

‘No. Germaine brought me my dinner here.’

‘It was the same every evening?’

‘Yes.’

‘Who’s Germaine?’

The oldest of the women.’

‘Did anyone come to the house?’

‘Monsieur Joseph got home about half past nine.’

‘You mean he lives here?’

‘Didn’t you know?’

Maigret had had no suspicion of it.

‘Give me the full details. Where’s his room?’

‘It isn’t a room, it’s a whole flat, on the third floor. They’re attics, with sloping ceilings, but they’re bigger than those above the garage. In the old days they were the servants’ rooms.’

‘How long has he been living in the house?’

‘I don’t know. It began before I came.’

‘And how long have you been here?’

‘Five years.’

‘Where does Monsieur Joseph have his meals?’

‘Nearly always in a café in the Boulevard des Batignolles.’

‘He’s a bachelor?’

‘A widower, or so I’m told.’

‘Doesn’t he ever sleep out?’

‘Only when he’s away from Paris, of course.’

‘Does he travel a lot?’

‘It’s he who goes to the country branches to inspect the books.’

‘What time did you say he came home?’

‘About half past nine.’

‘He didn’t go out again?’

‘No.’

‘No one else came?’

‘Monsieur Gaillardin.’

‘How do you come to know him?’

‘Because I’ve often let him in. At one time he and the boss were great friends. Then there was trouble between them, and yesterday was the first time for months that...’

‘You allowed him to go upstairs?’

‘Monsieur phoned me to let him in. There’s an inside telephone from the office to my lodge.’

‘What time was this?’

‘About ten o’clock. I’ve been used to telling the time by the sun, you know, and I don’t often think to look at the clock. Particularly as this one is always at least ten minutes fast.’

‘How long did he stay up there?’

‘A quarter of an hour, perhaps.’

‘How did you open the door for him when he left?’

‘By pushing the button, here, same as in any concierge’s lodge.’

‘You saw him go past?’

‘Of course I did.’

‘You looked at him?’

‘Well ...’

He hesitated, growing uneasy again.

‘It depends what you mean by look. There’s not much light under the archway. I didn’t clamp my face against the window. But I saw him, I mean recognized him. I’m sure it was him.’

‘But you don’t know what mood he was in?’

‘I certainly don’t.’

‘Did your employer telephone you after that?’

Why?’

‘Answer my question.’

‘No ... I don’t think so ... Wait ... No ... I got into bed. I read part of the newspaper in bed and then I put the light out.’

Which means that after Gaillardin left, nobody came into the house?’

Victor opened his mouth, then shut it again.

‘Isn’t that so?’ Maigret persisted.

‘That is so, of course ... But yet it may not be so ... It’s difficult to describe people’s lives in a few minutes, like this ... I don’t even know how much you know ...’

‘What do you mean?’

‘What have they told you, upstairs?’

‘Who?’

‘Well, Mademoiselle Louise, or Noémi, or Germaine ...’

‘Somebody may have come in last night without your knowing about it?’

‘Of course!’

‘Who?’

‘The boss, for one—he may have gone out and come in again. Haven’t you noticed the back door, in the Rue de Prony? That used to be the tradesman’s entrance, and he has a key to it.’

‘Does he ever use it?’

‘I don’t think so. I don’t know.’

‘Who else has a key?’

‘Monsieur Joseph, I’m sure of that, because I’ve sometimes seen him going out in the morning when I hadn’t seen him come in the night before.’

‘Who else?’

‘Probably the tart.’

Whom do you mean by that?’

‘The boss’s tart, the latest one, a little brunette; I don’t know her name, she lives somewhere near the Etoile.’

‘Did she come last night?’

‘I tell you I don’t know. Once before, you understand, when there was that business about the gamekeeper, they asked me so many questions that they made me say things that weren’t true. They even made me sign them, and later on they brought them up against me.’

‘Did you like your boss?’

What difference does that make?’

‘You refuse to answer?’

‘I only say that has nothing to do with it, it’s my own business.’

‘Just as you like.’

‘If I speak to you like this ...’

‘I understand.’

It was better not to push things further, and Maigret went slowly back to the first floor.

‘Madame Fumal still hasn’t come down?’ he asked the secretary.

‘She doesn’t want to see him till he’s been tidied up.’

‘How is she?’

‘The same as usual.’

‘She didn’t seem surprised?’

Louise Bourges shrugged her shoulders. She was more tense than she had been the day before, and several times Maigret noticed her biting her nails.

‘I can’t find any gun, Chief. They’re asking whether they can take the body away to the Medico-Legal Institute.’

‘What does the examining magistrate say?’

‘He agrees.’

‘Then so do I.’

Just at that moment Victor came up with the letters and paused, hesitant, when about to give them to Louise Bourges.

‘Hand them over!’ said Maigret.

There were fewer than he would have expected. Presumably most of Fumal’s correspondence went to his various offices. These were mostly bills, two or three invitations to charity entertainments, a letter from a solicitor at Nevers, and finally an envelope the Superintendent recognized at once. Louise Bourges was peering at it from a distance.

The address was written in pencil. The sheet of cheap paper bore only two words:

‘Final warning.’

Wasn’t this becoming almost ironical?

At that moment Ferdinand Fumal, lying on a stretcher, was leaving his house in the Boulevard de Courcelles, just opposite

the main entrance of the Parc Monceau, with its dripping trees.

‘Find me the telephone number of a man called Gaillardin, in the Rue François Premier.’

It was the secretary who passed the telephone directory to Lapointe.

‘Roger?’ asked the latter.

‘Yes. Get him for me.’

It was not a man who answered the Inspector’s call.

‘Excuse me, Madame, but may I speak to Monsieur Gaillardin? ... Yes ... I beg your pardon? ... He’s not at home?’

Lapointe looked questioningly at Maigret.

‘It’s very urgent ... Do you know if he’s at his office? ... You don’t know? You think he may be away from Paris? ... Just a moment ... Hold on, please ...’

‘Ask her whether he slept in the house last night.’

‘Hello. Can you tell me whether Monsieur Gaillardin slept at home last night? ... No ... When did you last see him? ... You had dinner together? ... At Fouquet’s? ... And he left you at ... I can’t hear ... A little after half past nine ... Without telling you where he was going ... I understand ... Yes ... Thank you ... No, there’s no message ...’

He explained to Maigret:

‘As far as I can make out it was his mistress, not his wife, and he doesn’t seem to be in the habit of confiding in her.’

Two inspectors, who had arrived a long time earlier, were lending a hand to the Criminal Records men.

‘You, Neveu, cut along to the Rue François Premier ... The address is in the telephone directory ... Gaillardin ... Try to find out whether the fellow took any luggage away with him, whether he was expecting to go, and that kind of thing ... Manage to get hold of a photo ... And to be on the safe side, let the stations and airports have a description of him ...’

It all sounded too simple, and Maigret was afraid to rely on it.

‘Did you know Gaillardin was coming to see your employer yesterday evening?’ he asked Louise Bourges.

‘As I told you, I knew someone had telephoned and that he had replied with something like: “All right”.’

‘What sort of humour was he in?’

‘The usual.’

‘Did Monsieur Joseph often come down to see him in the evening?’

‘I believe so.’

‘Where is Monsieur Joseph at the moment?’

‘Upstairs, I expect.’

He might have been, a moment earlier, but he wasn’t any longer, for they saw him coming across the landing, gazing round him in amazement.

It was rather unexpected, after all the comings and goings that had upset the household, to see the little greyish man come downstairs as though everything were as usual and hear him ask in a quite natural tone:

‘What is going on?’

‘Haven’t you heard anything?’ inquired Maigret gruffly.

‘Heard what? Where is Monsieur Fumal?’

‘He’s dead.’

‘What did you say?’

‘I said he was dead, and he’s already out of the house. You are a sound sleeper, Monsieur Joseph?’

‘I sleep like anyone else.’

‘You have heard nothing since half past seven this morning?’

‘I heard someone go into Madame Fumal’s room, on the floor below mine.’

‘What time did you go to bed last night?’

‘About half past ten.’

‘When did you leave your employer?’

The little man still did not seem to grasp what was happening.

‘Why are you asking me these questions?’

‘Because Fumal was murdered. You came down to see him after dinner yesterday?’

‘I didn’t come down, but I looked in on him when I got home.’

‘At what time?’

‘About half past nine. A little later, perhaps.’

‘And after that?’

‘After that, nothing. I went up to my own rooms, worked for an hour, and went to bed.’

‘You didn’t hear a shot?’

‘Up there one can’t hear a sound from this floor.’

‘You have a revolver?’

‘Me? I have never touched a weapon in my life. I never even did my national service, owing to bad health.’

‘You knew Fumal had one?’

‘He had shown it to me.’

They had at last discovered, under some papers in the drawer of the bedside-table, a Belgian revolver which had not been fired for years, and so could have nothing to do with the crime.

‘And you knew Fumal was expecting a visitor?’

In this house nobody gave a straight answer to a question; there was always a blank pause, as though the person questioned had to repeat the words to himself several times in order to understand them.

‘What visitor?’

‘Don’t pretend to be a fool, Monsieur Joseph. Incidentally, what is your real name?’

‘Joseph Goldman. You heard it yesterday when we were introduced.’

‘What was your profession before Fumal employed you?’

‘I was a bailiff for twenty-two years. As for being employed by him, that is not quite correct. You speak as though I were a servant or a clerk. Whereas in point of fact I was a friend, an adviser.’

‘You mean your job was to keep his dirty tricks on the right side of the law, more or less?’

‘Take care, Superintendent. There are witnesses present.’

‘And so what?’

‘I might call you to account for your incautious words.’

‘What do you know about Gaillardin’s visit?’

The old man compressed his lips, which were by nature remarkably thin.

‘Nothing.’

‘And I suppose you know nothing about a certain Martine who lives in the Rue de l’Etoile and probably, like yourself, has a key to the back door?’

‘I never concern myself with women.’

It was scarcely an hour and a half since Maigret had arrived in this house, and already he felt as though he were choking, he longed to get outside and breathe free air, however damp.

‘I must ask you to remain here.’

‘May I not go to the Rue Rambuteau? I’m expected there about some important decisions. You seem to be losing sight of the fact that we supply Paris with at least one-eighth of its meat, and that ...’

‘One of my inspectors will go with you.’

‘Which means?’

‘Nothing, Monsieur Joseph. Absolutely nothing!’

Maigret was ready to explode. In the big drawing-room the Public Prosecutor's men were putting the finishing touches to their report. Planche, the examining magistrate, asked the Superintendent:

'Have you been up to see her?'

He meant Madame Fumal, of course.

'Not yet.'

He would have to go. He would also have to question Felix and the other servants. He would have to get hold of Roger Gaillardin and interrogate Martine Gilloux, who perhaps had a key to the back door.

Finally, he must search, in the Rue Rambuteau offices and in those at La Villette, for any evidence that might ...

Maigret was disheartened from the start. He felt he had made a bad beginning. Fumal had come to ask for his protection. The Superintendent hadn't believed the man, and he'd been killed by a shot in the back. Soon, no doubt, the Minister of the Interior would be ringing up the head of the Judicial Police.

As if the vanishing Englishwoman hadn't been enough!

Louise Bourges was watching him from a distance, as though trying to guess his thoughts; and it so happened that he was thinking of her, wondering whether she had really seen her employer writing one of the anonymous letters.

If not, that would alter everything.

IV

THE DRUNKEN WOMAN AND THE STEALTHY-FOOTED PHOTOGRAPHER

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nearly thirty years ago, when Maigret, newly married, was still the secretary of the Police Station in the Rue Rochechouart, his wife sometimes used to call for him at the office, at noon. They would make a quick lunch so as to have time for a walk along the streets and boulevards, and Maigret remembered that one such walk had brought them, on a spring day, to this same Parc Monceau that he could now see, all black and white, outside the window.

There had been more nannies than there were now, most of them in trim uniforms. The babies' prams made an impression of luxurious comfort, and the iron chairs along the paths were bright with yellow paint; an old lady with violets on her hat was throwing bread to the birds.

When I'm a Superintendent ...' he had said jokingly.

And the two of them had looked through the railings, whose gilded lance-points glittered in the sun, at the wealthy houses bordering the park, imagining the calm elegant life that must go on behind those windows.

If there was anyone in Paris who had gained experience of brutal realities, anyone who, day after day, had been shown the truth that lay under the surface of things, it was Maigret himself; and yet he had never quite resigned himself to shedding his belief in certain of the pictures that belonged to his childhood or early youth.

Hadn't he once declared that he would have liked to be 'a mender of destinies', because he had such a desire to restore people to their real places, the places that would have been theirs if the world had been like a simple folk-tale?

There was probably more tragedy than harmony in eight out of the ten sumptuous houses that surrounded the Park. But he had seldom breathed an atmosphere so oppressive as in this one.

Everything seemed false and discordant, from the moment one passed by the lodge of the porter-valet who was neither porter nor valet but, for all his striped waistcoat, an ex-poacher, a murderer turned watchdog.

And what was Monsieur Joseph, the shady bailiff, doing in the attics of the house?

Even Louise Bourges was not reassuring, with her dream of marrying the chauffeur and opening an inn at Giens.

The former butcher from Saint-Fiacre had seemed even more out of place than the others, and the high, panelled walls, the furniture presumably bought together with the house looked as out of their element as the statues on either side of the stairhead.

What upset the Superintendent most of all, perhaps, was the malice he could sense behind Fumal's every word and deed, for he had always refused to believe in the existence of pure malice.

It was after ten o'clock when he left the first floor, where his colleagues were still working, and went slowly upstairs. On the second floor there was no maid to prevent him from opening the door of the drawing-room, with its fifteen or sixteen empty arm-chairs, and he coughed to announce his presence.

Nobody came. Nothing stirred. He went across to a half-open door leading into a smaller drawing-room, where a breakfast tray stood forgotten on a small table.

He knocked on a third door, listened hard, thought he heard a stifled cough, and finally turned the handle.

This was Madame Fumal's room, and she lay in bed, watching his advance, an expression of dull astonishment in her eyes.

'I beg your pardon. I found no servant to announce me. I suppose they're all downstairs, with my inspectors.'

Her hair was tousled and she had not washed. Her nightdress was wide open, revealing one shoulder and a curve of pallid breast. The day before, he might have felt some doubt. But now he was certain the woman facing him had been drinking,

not merely before she went to bed, but that morning already, and a strong smell of alcohol still hung about the room.

The butcher's wife was still watching him with an indefinable expression, as if, though not yet entirely reassured, she was feeling a kind of relief, even a secret mirth.

'I suppose you have been told?'

She nodded, and it was not grief that glittered her eyes.

'Your husband is dead. Someone killed him.'

At this she brought out, in a rather halting voice:

'I always thought it would end like that.'

And she tittered faintly—even more drunk than he had thought when he came in.

'You were expecting a murder?'

'With him, I was expecting anything.'

She pointed to the tumbled bed, to the untidy room, and faltered:

'I beg your pardon ...'

'You didn't have the curiosity to go downstairs?'

'Why should I?'

Suddenly her gaze became keener:

'He really is dead, isn't he?'

When Maigret nodded she slipped her hand under the bedclothes, pulled out a bottle and put it to her lips:

'Here's to his health!' she said jestingly.

But even in death Fumal still frightened her, for she looked timidly at the door and asked Maigret:

'Is he still in the house?'

'They've just taken him away to the Medico-Legal Institute.'

What are they going to do to him?'

'Hold a post-mortem.'

Was it the news that her husband's body was to be chopped up that brought that spiteful smile to her face? Did she look on it as a kind of revenge, a sort of amends for all she had suffered through him?

As a girl and a young woman she must have been like anyone else. What sort of a life had Fumal led her, to reduce her to this lamentable condition?

Maigret had come across other such wrecks, but nearly always in sordid surroundings, in shabby districts, and poverty had invariably been the cause of their degradation.

'Did he come to see you yesterday evening?'

'Who?'

'Your husband.'

She shook her head.

'He used to come sometimes?'

'Sometimes, yes, but I would have preferred not to see him.'

'You didn't go down to his office?'

'I never went down there. It was in his office that he saw my father for the last time, and three hours afterwards they found my father hanging.'

That seemed to have been Fumal's vice—to ruin people, not only those who got in his way or offended him, but just anybody, in order to assert his power, to convince himself of it.

'You don't know what visitors he received last night?'

Later, Maigret would have to tell an inspector to search these rooms.

The idea of doing it himself was repugnant. But it had to be done. There was nothing to prove that this woman might not at last have screwed up the courage to go and kill her husband, and it was not impossible that the gun might be found in her room.

'I don't know ... I don't want to know anything any more ... Do you know what I want? ... To be left all alone and ...'

Maigret hadn't heard. Still standing up, not far from the bed, he saw Madame Fumal's eyes focus on a point behind him. There was the flash of a light-bulb, and at the same instant the woman flung off the bedclothes and hurled herself, with unsuspected energy, at the photographer who had appeared, without a sound, in the doorway.

He tried to beat a retreat, but she had already grabbed his camera, threw it furiously on the ground, then picked it up, only to throw it down again with greater violence.

Maigret frowned, recognizing a reporter from one of the evening papers. Someone, he didn't know who, had told the news to the Press, and he would find the whole pack of them downstairs.

'Just a moment,' he said firmly.

It was his turn to pick up the camera, from which he removed the film.

'Out you go, my boy ...' he said to the young man.

To Madame Fumal he added:

'Go back to bed. I apologize for what happened. I will see you are left in peace from now on. But one of my men will have to search your suite.'

He was in a hurry to get out of the room, and would have liked to leave the house for ever. The photographer was waiting for him on the landing.

'I thought I might ...'

'You went a bit too far. Are the other reporters here?'

'Some of them.'

'Who gave them the alarm?'

'I don't know. About half an hour ago my editor sent for me and ...'

It must have been the man from the Medico-Legal Institute. All over the place there are people who are hand-in-glove with the newspapers.

There were seven or eight Press representatives downstairs already, and more would be arriving.

‘What happened exactly, Superintendent?’

‘If I knew that, my lads, I shouldn’t be here any longer, I want you to leave us to work in peace, and I promise you that if we discover anything ...’

‘Can we photograph the rooms?’

‘Well, be quick about it.’

There were too many people to interrogate for them all to be taken to the Quai des Orfèvres. There were big empty rooms available here. Lapointe was already at work, so was Bonfils, and Torrence had just arrived with Lesueur.

He told Torrence to go and search the second-floor rooms, and sent Bonfils to Monsieur Joseph’s flat. The latter was not yet back from the Rue Rambuteau.

‘When he comes in, ask him some questions on the off-chance, but I don’t think he’ll say much.’

The Public Prosecutor’s men had left by now, and so had most of the experts from the Criminal Records Department.

‘Send up one of the servants, by herself—Noémi, it’s her job—to see to Madame Fumal, and tell the rest to wait in the drawing-room.’

When the telephone rang in the dead man’s office, Louise Bourges took the call, as a matter of course.

This is Monsieur Fumal’s secretary ... Yes ... Oh yes, he’s here ... I’ll put you through ...’

She turned to Maigret:

‘It’s for you ... From the Quai des Orfèvres ...’

‘Hello-yes?’

It was the Director of the Judicial Police.

‘The Minister of the Interior has just rung me up ...’

‘He knows already?’

‘Yes. Everybody knows.’

Had one of the journalists spread the news to the wireless?
Quite possibly.

‘Furious?’

‘That’s not the word. Bothered, rather. He wants to be kept informed of the inquiry, step by step. Have you any idea?’

‘None.’

‘They’re expecting it to make a stir presently. The fellow was even more important than he made out.’

‘Do they miss him?’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘No special reason. Up to now, people have seemed rather relieved.’

‘You’re doing all you possibly can, aren’t you?’

He certainly was! And yet he’d never felt so little eagerness to find a murderer. True, he was curious to know who had at last decided to get rid of Fumal, which of these men or women had had enough of it and risked everything at one throw. But would he blame the criminal? Wouldn’t he feel a pang at heart when the handcuffs were put on?

He had seldom been faced with so many hypotheses, all equally plausible.

There was Madame Fumal, of course; she had only to go down one flight of stairs in order to avenge herself for twenty years of humiliation; and as well as regaining her freedom she would doubtless inherit Fumal’s fortune, or most of it.

Had she a lover? To look at her it appeared unlikely, but that was a subject about which he had grown sceptical.

Monsieur Joseph?

He seemed entirely devoted to the big butcher, in whose shadow his life was led. God knew what dirty business they were in together. Hadn’t Fumal had some hold over the creature, as he seemed to have over all who worked for him?

Even worms like Monsieur Joseph sometimes turned!

Louise Bourges, the secretary who had come to see him at the Quai des Orfèvres?

So far she was the only person who alleged that her employer had written the anonymous letters himself.

Felix, the chauffeur, was her lover. They were in a hurry to get married and settle at Giens.

Suppose she or Felix had robbed Fumal, or tried to swindle him, even to blackmail him? ...

Everyone in this business seemed to have a reason for killing Fumal even Victor, the ex-poacher, for his employer kept him on a tight rein.

The lives of the other servants must be looked into thoroughly. Then there was Gaillardin, who hadn't gone back to the Rue François Premier after visiting Fumal.

'Are you leaving, Chief?'

'I'll be back in a few minutes.'

He was thirsty, and felt the need to get out for a change of air.

'If anyone asks for me, Lapointe can take a message.'

On the landing he had to shake off the journalists, and downstairs he found several Press cars and one radio car drawn up at the curb. Because of this, a few passers-by had stopped to watch, and a uniformed policeman was standing at the door.

Hands in his pockets, Maigret strode rapidly towards the Boulevard des Batignolles and went into the first café he came to.

'A beer, please,' he ordered, 'and a counter for the telephone.'

He wanted to ring up his wife.

'I certainly shan't be home for lunch ... Dinner? ... I hope so ... Perhaps ... No, there are no special bothers ...'

Indeed, perhaps the Minister too was not sorry to be rid of a compromising friend. There must be others who were

delighted. The people in the Rue Rambuteau office, for instance, those at La Villette, and the managers of all the butchers' shops, who'd had a hard life with Fumal.

He didn't yet know that the afternoon papers would be announcing:

'King of the Meat Trade Murdered'

Newspapers love the word 'king', as they do the word 'millionaire'. One paper quoted the experts as saying that Fumal controlled one-tenth of the meat trade in Paris and more than a quarter in Northern France.

Who would inherit that empire? Madame Fumal?

As he left the bistro, Maigret caught sight of a prowling taxi, and this gave him the idea of taking a look at the Rue François Premier. He had already sent Neveu there, and had had no news from him, but he wanted to see for himself, and above all he was glad of an excuse to escape for a time from the sickening atmosphere of the Boulevard de Courcelles.

The building was a modern one, the concierge's lodge almost luxurious.

'Monsieur Gaillardin? Third floor left, but I don't think he's at home.'

Maigret went up in the lift and rang the doorbell. A young woman in a housecoat opened the door—or rather, until he told her who he was, just peeped through a narrow crack.

'You still have no news of Roger?' she asked then, showing him into a drawing-room as bright as any room in Paris could look in such weather.

'And haven't you?'

'No. Since your inspector came I've been worried. Just now I listened to the wireless ...'

'They talked about Fumal?'

'Yes.'

'You know your husband went to see him yesterday evening?'

She was pretty, with a luscious figure, and could hardly be over thirty.

‘He’s not my husband,’ she corrected, ‘Roger and I are not married.’

‘I know. I used the word by mistake.’

‘He has a wife and two children, but he doesn’t live with them. Not for some years ... wait a minute ... five years, exactly ...’

‘You know he’s in trouble?’

‘I know he’s practically ruined, and that it’s that man ...’

‘Tell me, does Gaillardin own a revolver?’

Because she had visibly turned pale, she could not lie.

‘There’s always been one in his drawer.’

‘Will you make sure it’s still there? May I come with you?’

He followed her into the bedroom, where she had clearly slept alone in a huge, very low bed. She opened two or three drawers, seemed surprised, opened others, more and more feverishly.

‘I can’t find it.’

‘I suppose he never carried it on him?’

‘Not that I know of. You don’t know him? He’s a peaceable man, very cheerful, what they call a lion vivant.’

‘Weren’t you uneasy when he didn’t come home?’

She did not know what to reply.

‘Yes ... Of course ... I told your inspector so ... But you see, he felt quite confident ... He was sure he’d find the money at the last moment ... I thought he’d gone to visit friends, perhaps out of town.’

‘Where does his wife live?’

‘At Neuilly. I’ll give you her address.’

She wrote it for him on a scrap of paper. At that moment the telephone rang, and with a word of apology she lifted the

receiver. The voice at the other end boomed so loudly that Maigret could hear what it said.

‘Hello! Madame Gaillardin?’

‘Yes ... That is ...’

‘You are speaking from 26 Rue François Premier?’

‘Yes.’

‘From the residence of a certain Roger Gaillardin?’

Maigret could have sworn that the invisible questioner was a sergeant at some local police station.

‘Yes; I live with him, but I’m not his wife.’

‘Will you come to the Puteaux police station as quickly as possible?’

‘Has something happened?’

‘Yes, something has happened.’

‘Roger’s dead?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can’t you tell me what happened?’

The first thing is for you to identify the body. Some papers were found on it, but ...’

Maigret signed to the young woman to hand him the receiver.

‘Hallo! This is Superintendent Maigret, of the Judicial Police. Tell me anything you know.’

‘At nine thirty-two a.m. a man’s body was found on the bank of the Seine, three hundred yards below the Puteaux bridge. Owing to a pile of bricks unloaded there some days ago, the passers-by didn’t notice it before. It was a bargeman who ...’

‘Murdered?’

‘No. At least I don’t think so, because he was still clutching an automatic with only one bullet missing from it. It looks as though he shot himself in the right temple.’

‘Thank you. When the body has been identified, send it to the Medico-Legal Institute, and have the contents of the pockets sent to the Quai des Orfèvres. The lady who answered you just now will be along soon.’

Maigret hung up.

‘He shot himself in the head,’ he said.

‘I heard.’

‘Has his wife got a telephone?’

‘Yes.’

She gave him the number and he dialled it at once.

‘Hallo! Madame Gaillardin?’

‘This is the maid.’

‘Is Madame Gaillardin out?’

‘She left for the Riviera two days ago, with the children. Who is that? Monsieur Gaillardin?’

‘No. The police. There’s something I want to know. Were you in the flat yesterday evening?’

‘Certainly I was.’

‘Did Monsieur Gaillardin call there?’

Why?’

‘Answer me, please.’

Well, yes.’

‘At what time?’

‘I’d gone to bed. It was after half past ten.’

‘What did he want?’

‘To speak to Madame.’

‘Did he often come to see her in the evening?’

‘Not in the evening, no.’

‘In the daytime?’

‘He used to come to see the children.’

‘But yesterday he wanted to speak to his wife?’

‘Yes. He seemed surprised that she’d gone away.’

‘Did he stay long?’

‘No.’

‘Did he seem upset?’

‘He was certainly tired. In fact I offered him a glass of brandy.’

‘Did he drink it?’

‘At one gulp.’

Maigret rang off and turned to the young woman.

‘You can go to Puteaux now.’

‘Aren’t you coming with me?’

‘Not now. I expect I shall be seeing you again, though.’

To sum up the position: Gaillardin had taken his revolver with him the previous evening when he left the Rue François Premier. He had gone first of all to the Boulevard de Courcelles. Was he hoping that Fumal would give him more time? Relying on some argument to make the man change his mind?

He must have been unsuccessful. A little later he had gone to his wife’s flat at Neuilly and found that only the maid was there. The flat was not far from the Seine. Three hundred yards away was the Puteaux bridge; he had crossed that.

Had he roamed along the river bank for long, before shooting himself in the head?

Maigret went into a rather smart bar and growled:

‘A pint of beer and a telephone counter.’

He wanted to ring the Medico-Legal Institute.

‘Maigret here. Is Doctor Paul there yet? What’s that? Yes, Maigret ... He’s still busy? Ask him if he’s found the bullet ... Half a second ... If he has, ask him whether it was fired from a revolver or from an automatic ...’

He heard the sound of footsteps, and voices at the other end of the line.

‘Hallo ... Superintendent? ... It seems the shot was from an automatic ... The bullet was lodged in ...’

Never mind where the bullet that killed Fumal had lodged.

Unless one could assume that Roger Gaillardin had been carrying two weapons that evening, it was not he who had killed the big butcher.

* * *

As Maigret crossed the first-floor landing of the house in the Boulevard de Courcelles, the journalists assailed him again, and to get rid of them he told them of the discovery made on the river bank at Puteaux.

The inspectors were still busy in the different rooms, questioning the secretary and the servants. Only Torrence was unoccupied. He seemed to be waiting impatiently for the Superintendent, and at once led him away into a corner.

‘I’ve found something up there, Chief,’ he said in an undertone.

‘The gun?’

‘No. Will you come with me?’

They went up to the second floor and into the drawing-room with the many arm-chairs and the doubtless never-opened piano.

‘In Madame Fumal’s room?’

Torrence looked mysterious and shook his head.

‘It’s a huge apartment,’ he said. ‘You’ll see.’

He seemed to be quite at home, and pointed out the various rooms to Maigret, paying no attention to Madame Fumal, who was still in bed.

‘I haven’t said anything about it to her. I think it’ll be better if it comes from you. This way ...’

They went through one empty bedroom and then another; these had obviously not been used for a long time. There was also an unused bathroom, where buckets and brooms were kept.

On the left of a corridor was a fair-sized room, full of stacked-up furniture, trunks and dusty suitcases.

At the far end of this corridor, Torrence opened the door of a room smaller than the others, and narrow; it had only one window, looking out on to the courtyard. The room was furnished as though for a servant—it had a divan bed with a red cotton cover, a table, two chairs and a cheap cupboard.

The inspector, with quiet triumph gleaming in his eyes, pointed to an ash-tray, of the type given away as advertisements; two cigarette-butts lay on it.

‘Sniff that, Chief. I don’t know what Moers will say about it, but I’d swear those cigarettes were smoked not long ago. Probably yesterday. Perhaps even this morning. When I came in the room still smelt of tobacco.’

‘You’ve looked in the cupboard?’

‘Nothing in there except a couple of blankets. Now get up on that chair. Look out, it’s not strong.’

Maigret knew by experience that people who want to hide something usually put it on top of a cupboard or wardrobe.

Up there now, under a thick layer of dust, were a razor, a packet of blades and a tube of shaving-cream.

‘What do you say to that?’

‘You’ve said nothing about them to the servants?’

‘I preferred to wait for you.’

‘Go back to the drawing-room.’

As for himself, he knocked on the bedroom door.

There was no answer, but when he opened it he found Madame Fumal staring in his direction.

‘What do you want now? Can’t I be allowed to sleep?’

She was neither better nor worse than before, and if she had been drinking again it was hardly noticeable.

‘I am terribly sorry to bother you, but I have my job to do and I must ask you a few questions.’

She was still gazing at him with a frown, as though trying to guess what would come next.

‘I believe I’m right in thinking that the servants all sleep in the rooms above the garage?’

‘Yes. Why?’

‘Do you smoke?’

She hesitated, but there was no time for a lie.

‘No.’

‘It’s always in this room that you sleep?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘And I suppose your husband never came to sleep in your apartment?’

This time it was clear she had understood; and abandoning her defensive attitude she shrank down further under the bedclothes.

‘Is he still there?’ she asked in a low voice.

‘No. But I have every reason to believe he spent at least part of the night there.’

That’s possible. I don’t know when he left. He comes and goes ...’

‘Who is he?’

She seemed surprised. She must have thought he knew more, and now she was sorry to have said so much.

‘Haven’t they told you?’

‘Who could have told me?’

‘Noémi ... Or Germaine ... They both know ... In fact Noémi ...’

She smiled strangely.

‘Is he your lover?’

At this she burst out laughing—harsh laughter that must have been painful.

‘Can you see me with a lover? Do you really suppose any man would still want me? Have you looked at me, Superintendent? Would you like to see what ...’

She clutched the sheet as though to throw it back, and for a horrified second Maigret thought she meant to show him her nakedness.

‘My lover!’ she said again. ‘No, Superintendent. I have no lover. It’s a long time since I ...’

She realized she was giving herself away.

‘I have had lovers, that’s true. And Ferdinand knew it. And he’s made me pay for it, all my life. With him, one has to pay for everything everything. You understand? But my brother never did him any harm, except for being my father’s son, and my brother.’

‘It was your brother who slept in the end room?’

‘Yes. He often does, several nights a week. When he’s capable of getting this far.’

‘What does he do?’

She looked at him straight in the eyes, fiercely, with a sort of restrained fury.

‘He drinks!’ she announced. ‘Like me! There’s nothing else left for him to do. He had money, a wife, children ...’

‘Your husband ruined him?’

‘He took his last penny. But if you imagine it was my brother who killed him, you’re wrong. He’s not even capable of that any longer. Any more than I am.’

‘Where is he at the moment?’

She shrugged her shoulders.

‘Somewhere where there’s a drink-shop. He’s not a young man now. He’s sixty-two and looks at least sixty-five. His children are married and refuse to see him. His wife works in a factory, at Limoges.’

She groped for her bottle.

‘Was it Victor who brought him to the house?’

‘If Victor had known about it he’d have gone and told my husband.’

‘Your brother had a key?’

‘Noémi had one made for him.’

What is your brother’s name?’

‘Emile ... Emile Lentin ... I can’t tell you where to find him. When he sees in the papers that Fumal is dead, I expect he’ll be afraid to come here. In that case you’ll pick him up sooner or later by the river or in the Salvation Army doss-house.’

She threw him another defiant glance, and with a bitter twist to her lips, began to drink from the bottle.

V

THE HOME-LOVING LADY AND THE FOOD-LOVING GIRL

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there was no need to say who he was, or to show his badge. A small glass lens was set into the front door at eye-level, in such a way that whoever rang the bell could be seen from inside. And now the door opened at once and a delighted voice exclaimed :

‘Monsieur Maigret!’

He, for his part, recognized the woman who opened the door and ushered him into a room which was over-heated by a gas stove. She must have been at least sixty by this time, but she had scarcely changed at all since the days when she kept a discreet brothel in the Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette and Maigret had rescued her from an awkward situation.

He had not expected to find her running this hotel in the Rue de l'Etoile, where the notice beside the door offered 'Luxurious bachelor flats to let by the month or the week'.

It was not exactly a hotel. The office was not a proper office either, but a private room with comfortable arm-chairs on whose silken cushions two or three Persian cats lay purring.

Rose's hair had thinned a bit but it was still peroxide blonde; her face and body were plumper and her complexion rather pallid.

'Who have you come about?' she asked Maigret as she cleared one of the arm-chairs. She was quite thrilled, for she had always had a bit of a crush on the Superintendent; whenever she got into trouble in the old days she would go to see him at the Quai des Orfèvres.

'Have you got a girl here called Martine Gilloux?'

It was midday. The newspapers had not yet announced Fumal's death. Feeling a bit of a coward, Maigret had left his staff at work in the depressing atmosphere of the Boulevard de Courcelles and made his escape, for the second time that morning.

'She's done nothing wrong, has she?' asked Rose, adding quickly:

'She's a good girl, absolutely harmless.'

'Is she upstairs now?'

'She went out, perhaps a quarter of an hour ago. She's one who doesn't like late nights. At this time of day she'll probably be making her little tour of the district before going to lunch at Gino's or some other restaurant in the Avenue des Ternes.'

The little sitting-room was like the one in the Rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, except that the walls were not adorned with the pornographic prints that had been part of the professional stock-in-trade at the old place. It was just as hot. Rose had always been a chilly creature, or rather she'd always loved warmth for its own sake, overheating her rooms, swathing

herself in quilted housecoats, and in winter sometimes spending weeks on end without putting her nose out of doors.

‘Has she been living here long?’

‘More than a year.’

‘What sort of a girl is she?’

They spoke the same language, the pair of them, and understood each other.

‘A nice child who had no luck for years. She comes from a very poor family. She was born somewhere in the suburbs, I’ve forgotten where, but she told me she’d gone hungry for a long time and I realized she wasn’t putting it on.’

Again she asked him:

‘Anything bad?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘I’m sure not. She’s not really very bright, and she tries to be nice to everybody. Men have taken advantage of her. She’s had her ups and downs, more downs than ups. For a long time she was in the hands of a brute who led her a dog’s life; but luckily for her he went to prison in the end. She told me all this herself, for she didn’t live here in those days, she was somewhere in Montmartre, off the Boulevard Barbes. By chance, she found someone who took a flatlet here for her, and since then she’s had a quiet life.’

‘Fumal?’

‘That’s his name. A big wholesale butcher, with several cars and a chauffeur.’

‘Does he come often?’

‘Sometimes not for two or three days, and then he’ll turn up every afternoon or every evening.’

‘Anything else?’

‘I can’t think of anything. You know how it goes on. He gives her enough to live comfortably, but not in luxury. She has some nice dresses, a fur coat, two or three bits of jewellery.’

‘Does he take her out?’

‘Now and then, especially when he’s dining in a restaurant with men friends who bring their own girls.’

‘Has Martine another man friend?’

‘I used to wonder, at first. Girls like that generally do feel the need to have somebody. I put some cunning questions to her. I always find out in the end what’s going on in the district. I can tell you definitely she has no one. She finds it more restful. In fact, she doesn’t really care for men.’

‘Does she drug?’

‘She’s not the type.’

‘What does she do with her time?’

‘She stays at home, reading or listening to the wireless. She sleeps. She goes out for her meals, takes a little stroll, and comes in again.’

‘Do you know Fumal?’

‘I’ve seen him go down the corridor. Often the chauffeur waits outside in the car while he’s upstairs.’

‘You say I shall find her at Gino’s?’

‘You know it? The little Italian restaurant ...’

Maigret knew it. The restaurant was not large or impressive-looking, but it was celebrated for its spaghetti and particularly for its ravioli, and the clientele was select.

When he went in he paused at the bar to ask:

‘Is Martine Gilloux here?’

There were already about a dozen people at lunch, men and women.

He followed the direction of the barman’s glance and saw a young woman eating alone in a corner.

After depositing his coat and hat in the cloakroom, Maigret went over to her and stopped, his hand on the empty chair at the opposite side of the table.

‘May I sit down?’

She looked at him blankly, so he added:

‘I have to talk to you. I’m from the police.’

He had noticed that ten or a dozen small dishes of hors d’oeuvres were ranged in front of her.

‘Don’t be frightened. I only need a few particulars.’

‘About whom?’

‘About Fumal. And yourself.’

He turned to the head waiter, who had approached the table.

‘I’ll have some hors d’oeuvres too, and then a spaghetti milanese.’

At last he said to the young woman, who was still looking uneasy, and even more bewildered:

‘I’ve just come from the Rue de l’Etoile. Rose told me I should find you here. Fumal is dead.’

She must have been between twenty-five and twenty-eight years old, but there was something older in her face—weariness, apathy, perhaps a lack of curiosity about life. She was fairly tall, rather fat, with a gentle, timid expression, reminding one of a child that has been beaten.

‘You didn’t know?’

She shook her head, still eyeing him, not knowing what to think.

‘You saw him yesterday?’

‘Wait a minute ... Yesterday ... Yes ... He came to see me about five o’clock ...’

‘How was he?’

‘Just as usual.’

One point had just struck Maigret. Up to now, everyone to whom he had broken the news of Fumal’s death had greeted it with delighted astonishment, more or less controlled. At the very least, one could sense their relief.

Martine Gilloux, on the contrary, had received the news gravely, perhaps with distress, certainly with anxiety.

Was she reflecting that her future hung in the balance yet again, that her tranquillity and comfort had come to an end, perhaps for ever?

Was she afraid of the streets, where she had roamed for so long?

‘Go on eating,’ he said, as his own order was brought.

She did so, mechanically, and one could see that, for her, eating was the greatest thing in life, the thing that reassured her. For the past year she had probably been eating in order to wipe out the memory of her long years of hunger, or to avenge herself for them.

‘What do you know about him?’ he asked her gently.

‘You’re sure you’re from the police?’

She was almost ready to ask advice from the barman or the head waiter, who were watching them. He showed her his badge.

‘Superintendent Maigret,’ he said.

‘I’ve read about you in the papers. Is it really you? I thought you were fatter.’

‘Tell me about Fumal. Let’s begin at the beginning. Where did you meet him, when and how?’

‘Just over a year ago.’

‘Where?’

‘In a little night-club in Montmartre, Le Désir. I was at the bar. He came in with some friends who had drunk more than he had.’

‘He didn’t drink?’

‘I’ve never seen him drunk.’

‘And then?’

‘There were other girls. One of his friends called one of them over. Then another—a butcher, I think, from Lille or

somewhere in the North—came and fetched my girl-friend, Nina. So Fumal was the only one at their table who hadn't got a girl. Then he beckoned to me to come over. You know how it happens. I could see he wasn't really keen, he only wanted to do like the others. I remember he looked at me and remarked:

‘ “You're thin. You must be hungry.” ‘

‘It's true I was thin in those days. Without consulting me, he called the head waiter and ordered a complete supper for me.

‘ “Eat and drink all you can,” ‘he said, ‘ “you won't have the luck to meet Fumal every evening!” ‘

‘That's more or less how it began. His friends left before him, with the two other girls. He asked me about my parents, about my childhood, what I was doing. There are a lot like that. He didn't even paw me.

‘In the end, he decided:

‘ “Come along! I'm going to take you to a decent hotel”.’

‘He spent the night there?’ asked Maigret.

‘No. It was near the Place Clichy, I remember. He paid a week in advance, and that night he didn't even come upstairs. He came back next day.’

‘And that time he did come upstairs?’

‘Yes. He stayed for a bit. But not so much for the reason you suppose. He wasn't very strong in that direction. Most of the time he talked to me about himself, and what he was doing, and his wife.’

‘In what way did he talk?’

‘I think he was unhappy.’

Maigret could scarcely believe his ears.

‘Go on,’ he murmured.

‘It's difficult, you understand? He talked to me so often about those things ...’

‘In short, he came to see you so as to talk about himself.’

Maigret had lapsed automatically into the familiar ‘tu’.

‘Not only that ...’

‘But chiefly?’

‘Perhaps. It seems he’d worked hard, harder than anybody in the world, and had become a very powerful man. Is that true?’

‘It was true—yes.’

‘He used to say things like:

“What good does it do me? People don’t realize it and they take me for a brute. My wife’s mad. My servants and employees think only of robbing me. When I go into a smart restaurant I can guess that people are muttering:

“Hallo—here comes the butcher!”’

The waiter brought spaghetti for Maigret and raviolo for Martine Gilloux, who had a flask of Chianti in front of her.

‘Do you mind ... ?’

Her worries had not spoilt her appetite.

‘He said his wife was mad?’

‘Yes, and that she hated him. He’d bought the Château in the village where he was born. Is that true, too?’

‘Quite true.’

‘I didn’t take much notice, you know. I thought he was probably boasting a good deal. The peasants in that village still call him the Butcher. He’d bought a big house in the Boulevard de Courcelles and he used to say it was more like a station waiting-room than a proper house.’

‘Ever been there?’

‘Yes.’

‘Have you a key?’

‘No. I only went there twice. The first time was because he wanted to show me where he lived. It was at night. We went up to the first floor. I saw the big drawing-room, his office, his bedroom, the dining-room, then some other rooms with hardly any furniture, and it really didn’t seem like a proper house.

‘ “The madwoman lives up above,” ‘he told me. ““I expect she’s on the landing, spying on us.””

‘I asked him if she was jealous and he said no, she just spied on him for the sake of spying, it was a mania with her. Does she really drink?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well then, you see, almost everything he said to me was true. And that he could walk in to see Cabinet Ministers without sending up his name?’

‘Only a slight exaggeration.’

There was surely something ironical about the relationship between Fumal and Martine. For over a year she’d been his mistress. And really he’d taken her, and kept her, solely in order to have someone he could swank in front of and complain to at the same time.

Some men, when their troubles get too much for them, pick up a tart on the street, just so as to confide in her.

Fumal had taken on a personal confidante for his exclusive use, settling her comfortably in the Rue de l’Etoile so that she had nothing to do but wait on his pleasure.

Yet in point of fact she had never believed him. Not only that, but she had never so much as wondered whether what he told her was true or false.

It was all the same to her.

Now he was dead she was awestruck to learn that he really had been as important as he made out.

‘He wasn’t worried, just lately?’

‘How do you mean?’

‘He didn’t think his life was in danger? He didn’t talk about his enemies?’

‘He often told me a man couldn’t become powerful without making hordes of enemies. He used to say:

‘ “They fawn on me like dogs, but in actual fact they hate me, all of them, and they’ll never be so happy as the day I kick the bucket.”’

‘And he would add:

‘ “You too, for that matter. Or rather, you would be pleased, if I left you something. But I shan’t. If I die or if I drop you, you’ll go back to the gutter”.’

She was not shocked by this. She had seen too much before he came along. He had brought her months of security, and that had been enough for her.

‘What happened to him?’ she asked in her turn. ‘A heart attack?’

‘Had he a weak heart?’

‘I don’t know. When people die suddenly one usually hears ...’

‘He was murdered.’

She stopped eating, so startled that she sat open-mouthed. It was quite a time before she asked:

‘Where? When?’

‘Last night. At home.’

‘Who did it?’

‘That’s what I’m trying to find out’

‘How was it done?’

‘A revolver shot.’

For the first time in her life, most likely, she had lost her appetite, and pushing her plate away she reached out for her glass and emptied it at a gulp.

‘Just my luck,’ he heard her whisper.

‘Did he ever mention a Monsieur Joseph to you?’

‘An old, rather small man?’

‘Yes.’

‘He called him the Thief. It seems he really had been a thief. Ferdinand might have had him put in prison. He preferred to keep him in his service, because he said scoundrels were more useful than honest men. He even fixed him up in the attics, so as to have him always at hand.’

‘And his secretary?’

‘Mademoiselle Louise?’

So Fumal really had made detailed confidences to his mistress.

‘What did he think about her?’

‘That she was frigid, ambitious and grasping and that she only worked for him so as to put money aside.’

‘Is that all?’

‘No. Something happened with her. Did she tell you?’

‘Go on.’

‘Oh well—now he’s dead ...’

She glanced round and lowered her voice, for fear of being overheard by the head waiter.

‘One day in the office he pretended to be making a pass at her, he began to paw her and then he told her:

‘ “Get your clothes off.” ‘

‘And she did?’ asked Maigret in surprise.

‘So he said. He didn’t even take her into his bedroom. He stood there, by the window, while she undressed, watching her ironically. When she’d taken off every stitch, he asked her:

‘ “You’re a virgin?” ‘

‘What did she say?’

‘Nothing. She blushed. And after a bit he grunted:

‘ “You’re not a virgin. That’ll do! Put your clothes on again!” ‘

‘At the time I didn’t believe that story. I’ve had insults to put up with too. But I’m not well brought up or educated. Men know they can behave however they want with me. But a girl like that ...

‘If he wasn’t lying, he watched her while she dressed, and then pointed to her chair and her shorthand pad and began to dictate letters to her ...’

‘You haven’t a lover?’ asked Maigret point-blank.

She said no, promptly, but at the same time she glanced at the barman.

‘He’s the chap?’

‘No.’

‘You’re in love with him?’

‘I’m not in love.’

‘But you easily could have been—no?’

‘I don’t know. He takes no notice of me.’

He ordered coffee and asked Martine:

‘No dessert?’

‘Not today. I’m so whacked I shall go to bed. You don’t need me any more?’

‘No. Never mind the bill, I’ll attend to that. You’re not to leave the Rue de l’Etoile until further notice.’

‘Not even for meals?’

‘Only for meals.’

The inspectors had lunched in a little Normandy restaurant they had discovered just off the Boulevard de Courcelles, and were already back at work when Maigret arrived.

There were a few bits of news, of no great importance. It had been confirmed that Roger Gaillardin had committed suicide—the revolver had not been put into his hand when he was dead. And it was definitely the one he had had in his flat in the Rue François Premier.

The ballistics expert also said that the automatic found in Fumal’s room had not been fired for months, probably not for years.

Lucas had come back with Monsieur Joseph from the Rue Rambuteau, where everything was in wild confusion.

‘There’s no one to give orders and nobody knows what turn things will take. Fumal couldn’t bear to delegate authority to anyone, he managed everything himself, turning up at the most unexpected moments, and his staff lived in perpetual terror. Only Monsieur Joseph knew the ins and outs of the business, it appears, and he has no legal powers and is as much hated as his boss used to be.’

The evening papers, which were just out, corroborated this state of affairs. Nearly all of them had the same headline

‘king of meat-market murdered’

‘A man who was never much in the public eye,’ they explained, ‘but who nevertheless played a considerable part...’

They gave the list of the companies he had formed, with their branches and sub-branches, making a positive empire.

They recalled the fact—unknown to Maigret—that five years previously the said empire had almost collapsed when the tax authorities had pushed their noses into Fumal’s affairs. Scandal had been averted, though according to well-informed circles the Treasury had been defrauded of over a billion francs.

How had the business been hushed up? This the newspapers did not explain; only giving it to be understood that the former village butcher had protectors in high places.

One of the newspapers asked:

‘Will his death bring the matter forward again?’

In any case some people must be feeling uncomfortable this afternoon, including the Minister who had telephoned the Judicial Police.

What the Press did not know yet, and might perhaps find out, was that, only the day before, this same Fumal had asked for police protection.

Had Maigret done all that was in his power?

He had sent an inspector to watch the house in the Boulevard de Courcelles, which is the routine procedure on such occasions. He had gone himself to have a look at the place, and he had instructed Lapointe to follow Fumal wherever he went, as from the next morning. They had been about to continue the inquiry when ...

He had not been at fault professionally. All the same he was not pleased with himself. In the first place, hadn't he allowed his judgment to be influenced by childhood memories, especially by the way Fumal's father had behaved to his own father?

He had not felt the least sympathy for the man who had come to see him with a recommendation from the Minister of the Interior.

Whereas when Louise Bourges, the secretary, had come along, he had taken her entirely at her word.

He felt sure the story Martine had told him just now, at the restaurant, was true. Ferdinand Fumal was exactly the kind of man to humiliate a woman in some disgusting way. It was true, too, that the secretary felt nothing but contempt for him, or hatred, and that if she remained in his employment it was solely with the idea of marrying Felix and having enough, between the two of them, to buy an inn at Giens.

Was she satisfied with the salary she was earning? Being so close to Fumal, knowing all his business secrets, might she not have other ways of making money?

The man used to tell his mistress:

'Their one idea is to rob me, the lot of them ...'

Had he been so far wrong? Up to now, Maigret had met nobody who cared a jot for him. To remain in his employment went against the grain with them all.

Fumal, for his part, did nothing to make himself popular. On the contrary, he seemed to find a malignant pleasure, a secret thrill, in calling forth hatred.

It was not merely for the last few days, or weeks, or even years, that he had felt this hatred around him.

Why had it taken him until yesterday to become uneasy enough to ask for police protection?

Why—if his secretary was telling the truth—had he taken the trouble to send himself anonymous threats?

Had he suddenly discovered that he had one enemy more dangerous than the rest? Or had he given somebody a reason for doing away with him at short notice?

That was a possibility. Moers was not only examining the anonymous notes, but specimens of the handwriting of Fumal and Louise Bourges as well. He had called in one of the leading Paris graphologists to help him.

From the office in the Boulevard de Courcelles, Maigret—his glum, heavy manner unchanged—rang through to the laboratory.

‘Moers? ... Getting any results? ...’

He could imagine them, up in the attics of the Palais de Justice, working by electric light, throwing the documents on a screen, one by one.

Moers made his report in his even tones; he had verified that all but one of the threatening letters bore only Fumal’s fingerprints. With those of Maigret and Lucas. On the first of them the prints of Louise Bourges had been found.

This seemed to bear out what Louise had said, for she claimed to have opened the first letter, but not the following ones.

On the other hand that proved nothing, because if she had written the notes she was quite intelligent enough to have worn gloves while doing it.

‘What about the writing?’

‘We’re still working at that. It’s awkward, because of the copybook style. So far there’s nothing to show that Fumal didn’t write the letters himself.’

The staff was still being questioned in the next-door room, people being confronted in pairs and then interviewed again separately. There were already pages and pages of statements; Maigret had them brought to him and ran through them.

Felix, the chauffeur, confirmed what Louise Bourges had said. He was a short, thick-set, swarthy man with a somewhat arrogant expression.

Question: You are the lover of Mademoiselle Bourges?

Answer: We are engaged to be married.

Question: You sleep with her?

Answer: She'll tell you about that, if she chooses.

Question: You have been spending most nights in her room?

Answer: If she told you so, it must be true.

Question: When were you intending to get married?

Answer: As soon as possible.

Question: What were you waiting for?

Answer: Till we had enough money to set ourselves up with.

Question: What were you doing before you entered Monsieur Fumal's employment?

Answer: I was a butcher's assistant.

Question: How did he come to take you on?

Answer: He bought the shop where I was working—he was always buying up butchers. He noticed me and asked if I knew how to drive a car. I told him I was the one who drove the delivery van.

Question: Was Louise Bourges already working for him then?

Answer: No.

Question: You didn't know her?

Answer: No.

Question: Your boss didn't often go about on foot in Paris?

Answer: He had three cars.

Question: He didn't drive himself?

Answer: No. I took him everywhere.

Question: Including the Rue de l'Etoile?

Answer: Yes.

Question: You knew whom he went to see there?

Answer: His tart.

Question: Did you know her?

Answer: I've driven her with him in the car. They sometimes went to a restaurant together, or up to Montmartre.

Question: Fumal never tried to give you the slip, just lately?

Answer: I don't understand.

Question: He never had himself driven somewhere and then took a taxi, for instance, to go on elsewhere?

Answer: I never noticed it.

Question: He never stopped the car at a stationer's shop or a newsagent's? He never asked you to buy him some writing-paper?

Answer: No.

There were pages and pages of this. At one point it ran:

Question: You found him a good boss?

Answer: There are no good bosses.

Question: You hated him?

No answer.

Question: Did intimacy ever occur between Louise Bourges and him?

Answer: Fumal or no Fumal, I'd have smashed his teeth in, and if you're insinuating ...

Question: He never tried?

Answer: Luckily for him.

Question: Were you robbing him?

Answer: Pardon?

Question: I am asking you whether you used to take a rake-off on petrol for instance, or on repair bills and so forth ...

Answer: It's obvious you didn't know him.

Question: He kept a close eye on things?

Answer: He didn't want to be taken for a sucker.

Question: So you had nothing but your wages?

In another file was a statement by Louise Bourges. Maigret read:

Question: Did your boss never try to go to bed with you?

Answer: He kept a girl specially for that.

Question: He no longer had any relations with his wife?

Answer: That is not my business.

Question: Did no one ever offer you money to get you to influence him, for instance, or to give away some of his plans?

Answer: He was not open to influence and he told nobody about his plans.

Question: How many more years did you expect to remain in his employment?

Answer: As few as possible.

Germaine, the woman who did the heavy cleaning work, had been born at Saint-Fiacre, where her brother was still a small farmer. Fumal had bought the farm. He had bought nearly all the farms that used to belong to the Comte de Saint-Fiacre.

Question: How did you come into his employment?

Answer: I was a widow. I was working on my brother's farm. Monsieur Fumal suggested I should come to Paris.

Question: Were you happy here?

Answer: When have I ever been happy?

Question: Were you fond of your master?

Answer: He wasn't fond of anybody.

Question: And you?

Answer: I've no time to ask myself such things.

Question: You knew Madame Fumal's brother often spent the night on the second floor?

Answer: It's no business of mine.

Question: It never occurred to you to tell your master about it?

Answer: The master's affairs are none of our business.

Question: Do you intend to remain in Madame Fumal's service?

Answer: I shall do what I've done all my life—I shall go wherever I'm wanted.

The desk telephone rang. Maigret picked up the receiver. It was the police station in the Rue de Maistre, in Montmartre.

'The chap you're looking for is here.'

What chap?'

'Emile Lentin. He was found in a bistro near the Place Clichy.'

'Drunk?'

'Fairly.'

'What does he say?'

'Nothing.'

'Take him to the Quai des Orfèvres. I'll see him presently.'

No gun had been found in the house or in the outbuildings.

Monsieur Joseph, seated in one of the uncomfortable Renaissance arm-chairs in the anteroom, was biting his nails as he waited for one of the inspectors to question him for the third time.

VI

THE MAN IN THE LUMBER-ROOM AND THE SUMS BORROWED FROM THE PETTY CASH

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it was five o'clock when Maigret got back to the Quai des Orfèvres; the lights were on already, and that made one more day without a glimpse of sun—one wouldn't even have suspected it was still there, behind the thick layer of angry-looking clouds.

There were a few papers waiting on his desk, as usual, most of them about Mrs. Britt. The public never gets worked up right away. It's as though it were distrustful of any case the papers are only just beginning to talk about. After two or three days the first reaction begins to be felt in Paris, and then in the provinces. The story of the vanished Englishwoman had already penetrated to the most remote villages, and even to foreign countries.

One of the messages reported she had been seen at Monte Carlo by two people, one of them a croupier at one of the tables; and as this was not at all unlikely, the Superintendent went into the inspectors' office to give instructions about the matter.

The office was practically empty.

'Someone was brought along for you, Chief. Considering the state he was in, I thought I'd better lock him up in the lumber-room.'

This was the name given to a narrow room at the end of the corridor, which had the advantage of being lit only by a skylight that was out of reach. After the day when a suspect, shut up in an office to await interrogation, had thrown himself out of the window, a grey-painted bench had been put into the unused room and a stout lock on the door.

'How is he?'

'Dead drunk. He lay down at once and he's asleep. I hope he's not been sick.'

All the way along in the taxi that had brought him from the Boulevard de Courcelles, Maigret had been thinking about Fumal and the strange way he had met his death.

He was a very suspicious man, all the evidence pointed to that. He was no simpleton. And it must be admitted he had a kind of skill in summing people up.

He had not been killed in his bed, nor taken by surprise when off his guard for some reason or other.

He had been found fully dressed, in his office. He had been standing in front of a cupboard containing files, when he'd been shot from behind, at point-blank range.

Could the murderer have come in without a sound, and crept up unnoticed? Most unlikely, especially as a big stretch of the parquet floor was uncarpeted.

So Fumal must have known him, known he was behind him, and not been expecting the attack.

Maigret had glanced at the papers in the mahogany cupboard, most of which were business documents, contracts, deeds of sale or transfer about which he understood nothing, and he had asked the Finance Department to send him an expert, who was now on the spot, inspecting the papers one by one.

In another piece of furniture they had found two packets of writing-paper similar to that of the anonymous letters, and that, too, would mean work for the police. Moers would first try to trace the manufacturer. After that, inspectors would go out to question all retailers who sold that type of paper.

'The Director hasn't asked for me?'

'No, Chief.'

What would be the use of going to see him now? To tell him one had found nothing? Maigret had been instructed to guard Fumal's life, and Fumal had died a few hours later. Was the Minister furious? Or on the contrary, was he secretly relieved?

'Have you the key?'

The key of the lumber-room. He went down the corridor, listened at the door for a moment, heard nothing, opened it,

and saw a man stretched out on the bench at what seemed great length, his head resting on his folded arms.

He was not exactly a tramp, but his suit was old, crumpled and stained like that of a man who sometimes sleeps fully dressed in all kinds of places. His brown hair was too long, especially at the back.

Maigret touched him on the shoulder, then shook him, and after a time the drunkard stirred, grunted, and finally rolled over almost completely.

‘Whadyou wan’?’ he growled thickly.

‘Would you like a glass of water?’

Emile Lentin sat up, still not realizing where he was, opened his eyes and gave the Superintendent a long stare, wondering why this man was standing in front of him.

‘Don’t you remember? You’re at Judicial Police Headquarters. I am Superintendent Maigret.’

Little by little the man was coming to, and his expression changed, became timid and crafty.

‘Why was I brought here?’

‘Are you in a condition to understand what is said to you?’

He passed his tongue over his dry lips.

‘I’m thirsty.’

‘Come to my office.’

He made Lentin walk in front of him, and the man’s legs were so shaky there was no danger of his running away.

‘Drink this, anyhow.’

Maigret offered him a large glass of water and two aspirins, and he swallowed them obediently.

Madame Fumal’s brother had a worn face with red eyelids and his eyeballs seemed as though floating in some fluid.

‘I haven’t done anything,’ he began without being asked, ‘and Jeanne’s not done anything either.’

‘Sit down.’

He sat down hesitantly on the edge of an arm-chair.

‘Since when have you known your brother-in-law was dead?’

The man only gazed silently at Maigret, who went on:

When you were found in Montmartre the afternoon papers hadn’t yet appeared. Did the police talk to you?’

He made an effort to remember, repeating:

‘The police ... ?’

‘The police who picked you up in the har.’

He tried to smile politely.

‘Perhaps ... Yes ... There was something like that ... I beg your pardon ...’

‘Since what time today have you been drunk?’

‘I don’t know ... For a long time ...’

‘But you knew Fumal was dead?’

‘I knew it would turn out like this.’

‘That what would turn out like this?’

‘That all the blame would be laid on me.’

‘You spent the night in the Boulevard de Courcelles?’

One could feel he had to make an effort to follow Maigret’s meaning and his own train of thought. He must have a terrible hangover, and the sweat stood out on his forehead.

‘I suppose you wouldn’t give me a drink? ... Not much ... You know, just enough to pep me up ...’

It was true that at the stage he had reached a little glass of spirits would steady him a bit, at least for the time being. In his drunkenness he had arrived at the same point as a drug-addict, who suffers tortures when the time comes for his usual dose.

Maigret opened his cupboard and poured a little brandy into a glass, while Lentin watched him with a mixture of gratitude

and stupefaction. It must have been the first time in his life that the police had given him a drink.

‘Now try to answer my questions exactly.’

‘I promise!’ he said, already sitting straighter in his chair.

‘You spent the night, or part of the night, at your sister’s flat, as you often do?’

Whenever I’m in the district.’

What time did you leave the Boulevard de Courcelles?’

Again he looked closely at Maigret, like a man who hesitates, trying to weigh the pros and cons.

‘I suppose I’d better tell the truth?’

‘Undoubtedly.’

‘It was a little after one o’clock at night, perhaps two o’clock. I’d gone there in the late afternoon. I’d lain down on the divan, because I was very tired.’

Were you drunk?’

‘Perhaps. I’d certainly been drinking.’

‘What happened after that?’

‘After a time Jeanne, my sister, brought me something to eat—some cold chicken. She hardly ever has her meals with her husband. Her lunch and dinner are brought up to her on a tray. When I’m there she nearly always asks for something cold—ham or chicken—and shares it with me.’

‘You don’t know what time it was.’

‘No. It’s long enough since I’ve had a watch.’

‘You chatted, your sister and you?’

‘What would we say to each other?’

And that was one of the most tragic remarks Maigret had ever heard. True enough, what could they have said to each other? They were both practically at the same point. They had got beyond the stage at which people still rehash memories or vent their bitterness.

‘I asked her for a drink.’

‘How did your sister get hold of drink? Did her husband supply her?’

‘Not enough. I used to go and buy it for her.’

‘She had money?’

He sighed, with a glance at the cupboard; but the Superintendent did not offer him a second tot.

‘It’s so complicated ...’

What’s complicated?’

‘Everything ... The whole of that life ... I know people won’t understand and that’s why I cleared out ...’

‘Just a moment, Lentin. Let’s go on taking things in their order. Your sister brought you something to eat. You asked her for a drink. You don’t know what the time was, but it was already dark, isn’t that so?’

‘Certainly.’

‘You drank together?’

‘Just a glass or two. She wasn’t feeling well. There are times now when she can’t breathe properly. She went off to bed.’

‘And then?’

‘I went on lying there and smoking cigarettes. I’d have liked to know what time it was. I listened to the sounds from the Boulevard, where only an occasional car was going past. Without putting on my shoes I went out on the landing and found the house was in darkness.’

‘What did you intend to do?’

‘I hadn’t a cent. Not even a ten-franc piece. Jeanne had no money either. Fumal didn’t give her any, and often she had to borrow from the maids.’

‘You meant to ask your brother-in-law for money?’

The man almost laughed.

‘Of course not! Oh well, if I’ve got to tell you everything ... Here we go! Have you been told how suspicious he was? He didn’t trust a soul. Every piece of furniture in the house was kept locked. But I had discovered a trick. His secretary, Mademoiselle Louise, always had money in her drawer. Not much. Never more than five or six thousand francs, chiefly in change and small notes, to buy stamps, pay for registered letters at the Post Office, and give tips. It was what they called the petty cash.

‘So from time to time, when I was cleaned out, I’d go down to the office and take a few hundred-franc pieces...’

‘Fumal never caught you at it?’

‘No. I went on evenings when he was out, for choice. Once or twice it so happened he was in bed, but he didn’t hear anything. I’m cat-footed.’

‘He wasn’t in bed yesterday?’

‘No, he was not!’

‘What did he say to you?’

‘He said nothing to me, for the very good reason that he was dead, stretched out at full length on the carpet.’

‘You took some money all the same?’

‘I was even on the point of taking his wallet. You see I’m being frank. I told myself it was I who’d be accused sooner or later, and that it would be a good long time before I could come to the house again.’

‘Was there a light on in the office?’

‘If there had been I should have seen it under the door and I wouldn’t have gone in.’

‘Did you switch it on?’

‘No. I had a pocket lamp.’

‘What did you touch?’

‘First of all I touched his hand, which was cold. That meant he was dead. Then I opened the drawer of the secretary’s desk.’

‘Were you wearing gloves?’

‘No.’

It would be easy to make a check. The experts had taken impressions of the finger-prints in both offices. They were upstairs now, filing them. If Lentin was telling the truth, his prints would have been found on Mademoiselle Bourges’s desk.

‘You didn’t see the revolver?’

‘No. My first idea was to leave without saying anything to my sister. Then I thought she’d better know about it. I went upstairs again and woke her. I told her:

“Your husband’s dead.”

‘She wouldn’t believe it. She came down with me in her nightdress, and I shone the light on the body while she watched from the door.’

‘She didn’t touch anything?’

‘She didn’t even come into the room. She said:

“He really does look dead. At last! ...” ‘

This explained the woman’s lack of response when Maigret had spoken to her, that morning, about Fumal’s death.

‘And then?’

‘We went back upstairs and began to drink.’

‘To celebrate the event?’

‘More or less. After a bit we both got very merry, and I believe we started to laugh. I don’t remember whether it was she or I who remarked:

“Father hung himself too soon ...” ‘

‘It didn’t occur to you to send for the police?’

Lentin stared at him, dumbfounded. Why should they have sent for the police? Fumal was dead. For them, that was all that mattered.

‘In the end I thought I’d better leave ... If I were found in the house ...’

What time was that?’

‘I don’t know. I walked as far as the Place Clichy and nearly all the bars were closed. In fact I believe only one was open. I had a glass or two there. Then I went on along the Boulevard as far as Pigalle, where I went into another bar, and finally I must have gone to sleep on a banquette in some cafe, but I don’t know where. They turned me out at crack of dawn. I walked on again. I even went to look at the house in the Boulevard de Courcelles.’

‘Why?’

‘To find out what was happening. There were some cars outside and a policeman at the door. I didn’t go close. I walked on ...’

Those words kept recurring like a leitmotiv; and indeed, walking and propping his elbows on bars were Lentin’s principal occupations.

‘You never do any work?’

‘Sometimes I lend a hand at the Central Markets, or on road repairs.’

In all probability he sometimes opened car doors outside hotels, too, and perhaps did a bit of shoplifting. Maigret would get the clerks upstairs to find out whether he’d ever been in prison.

‘Have you a revolver?’

‘If I’d ever possessed one I’d have sold it long ago. Or the police would have taken it off me long ago, for I’ve spent I don’t know how many nights in the cells.’

‘Your sister?’

‘What about my sister?’

‘She had no gun?’

‘You don’t know her. I’m tired, Superintendent. You must admit I’ve behaved well, I’ve told you everything I know. If

only you'd give me one tiny drop more ...'

His expression was humble, pleading.

'Just a tiny drop!' he repeated.

There was probably nothing more to be got out of him, and Maigret walked over to the cupboard, while Lentin's face brightened.

Maigret suddenly began to address him as 'tu', just as he had done with Martine Gilloux.

'Don't you miss your wife and kids?'

Glass in hand, the man hesitated, swallowed the spirits at one gulp and murmured reproachfully:

'Why bring that up? To begin with, the kids are grown up now. Two of them are married and they wouldn't recognize me if they saw me in the street.'

'You don't know who killed Fumal?'

'If I knew I'd go and thank him. And if I'd had the courage I'd have done it myself. I'd sworn to myself I would, after my father's death. I told my sister I was going to. It was she who pointed out that all it would do would be to land me in prison for the rest of my days. But if I'd found a way of not being caught...'

Had the man or woman who had really killed Fumal argued in the same way, waited for a chance to do it without risk?

'Do you want to ask me anything else?'

No. Maigret could think of no other question to put to him.

All he said was:

'What will you do, if I let you go?'

Lentin made a vague gesture, indicating the city into which he would vanish once again.

'I'll keep you for a day or two.'

'With nothing to drink?'

‘You shall have a glass of wine tomorrow morning. You need to rest.’

The bench in the lumber-room was hard. Maigret rang for an inspector.

‘Take him to the cells. Tell them to feed him and let him sleep.’

As he got to his feet the man threw a last glance towards the cupboard, opened his mouth to beg for yet another drink, but didn’t dare, and walked out, faltering:

‘Thank you.’

Maigret called the inspector back.

‘Have his prints taken and give them to Moers.’”

He explained briefly why. Meanwhile, Madame Fumal’s brother waited half-way down the empty corridor, making no attempt to escape.

Maigret spent ten long minutes sitting at his desk, staring straight ahead of him and smoking his pipe as though in a dream. At last he heaved himself out of his chair and walked across to the inspectors’ office. This was still nearly empty. Low voices could be heard from the neighbouring room, and he went in, to find that all those who had spent the day working in the house in the Boulevard de Courcelles were gathered there.

They had left only one man at the house—Inspector Neveu, whom one of them would relieve presently.

Acting on the orders of the Superintendent, the inspectors were comparing the answers made to them during the various interrogations.

Nearly everyone had been questioned two or three times. As for Monsieur Joseph, he had been called in five times, going back each time to wait on the landing, with its Renaissance chairs and its marble statues.

‘I suppose I have the right to go out and see to my business?’ he had asked in the end.

‘No.’

‘Not even for a meal?’

‘There’s a cook in the house.’

The kitchen was on the ground floor, behind Victor’s lodge. The cook was a fat, elderly woman, a widow, who seemed to know nothing about what went on in the house. Some of her replies were true to type:

Question: What do you think of Monsieur Fumel?

Answer: What do you expect me to think? How should I know the man?

She pointed to the service-hatch with its lift for dishes, and to the ceiling of her kitchen.

Answer: I work down here and he eats up there.

Question: Did he never come down to see you?

Answer: He sent for me to come up every now and then, to give me orders, and once a month for me to show him the accounts.

Question: He kept a close eye on those?

Answer: What do you call a close eye?

Asked about Louise Bourges, she declared:

Answer: If she sleeps with someone it’s natural at her age. That won’t happen to me any more, worse luck!

About Madame Fumal:

Answer: It takes all sorts to make a world.

How long had she been in the house?

Answer: Three months.

Question: You didn’t find the atmosphere peculiar?

Answer: If you’d seen all I’ve seen in houses like this!

It was true she had changed jobs dozens of times in her life.

Question: Were you never comfortable anywhere?

Answer: I'm fond of change.

Every few months she would turn up again in the employment agency, where she was a regular customer. She specialized in replacement work and in jobs with foreigners visiting Paris.

Question: You saw nothing and heard nothing?

Answer: When I'm asleep I'm asleep.

Maigret's reason for burdening his men with the meticulous work they were now doing was that he still hoped that some revealing contradiction between two witnesses might come to light, even if only on a point of detail.

If Roger Gaillardin was not the murderer—and it was practically certain he was not—then Fumal had not been killed by anyone from outside.

Inspector Vacher, who had been watching the house throughout the evening, corroborated Victor's statements to within a few minutes.

Shortly before eight o'clock, Fumal's car had driven into the courtyard. Felix, the chauffeur, was at the wheel. Fumal and his secretary were sitting in the back of the car.

After admitting the car Victor had closed the gate again and it had not been reopened that night.

Always according to Victor, Louise Bourges had gone up to the first floor with her employer, but had stayed only a few minutes, after which she had come down to the servants' dining-room, near the kitchen.

She had dined there. Germaine, the housemaid, had gone up to wait on Fumal, while Noémi carried a tray up to the second floor for Madame Fumal.

All that seemed to be definite. No conflicting evidence had been discovered.

After dinner, Louise Bourges had gone up to the office again and stayed there for approximately half an hour. At about half past nine she had crossed the courtyard and gone into the servants' quarters.

Felix, when questioned, had stated:

Answer: I went to join her in her room, as I did almost every evening.

Question: Why do the two of you sleep in her room and not in yours?

Answer: Because hers is bigger.

Louise Bourges, without a blush, had said exactly the same thing.

Germaine, the housemaid:

Answer: I heard them at their little affairs for at least an hour. She seems frigid, just to look at. But if you had to sleep in the next room, with only a thin partition between your bed and hers ...

Question: What time was it when you got to sleep?

Answer: I wound the alarm-clock at half past ten.

Question: You didn't hear anything during the night?

Answer: No.

Question: You knew about Emile Lentin's visits to his sister?

Answer: Like everyone else.

Question: What do you mean by everyone else?

Answer: Noémi, the cook ...

Question: How did the cook know, considering she never goes up to the second floor?

Answer: Because I told her.

Question: Why?

Answer: So that when he was there she should send up double portions, naturally!

Question: Victor knew, too?

Answer: I didn't tell him anything. I've always distrusted him, but he's not a man from whom you can hide things.

Question: And the secretary?

Answer: Felix must have told her.

Question: And how did Felix know?

Answer: Through Noémi.

So everybody in the house was aware that Lentin often came to sleep in the little room on the second floor—everybody except perhaps Ferdinand Fumal.

And Monsieur Joseph, who slept right overhead?

Question: You are acquainted with Emile Lentin?

Answer: I was acquainted with him, until he took to drink.

Question: It was his brother-in-law who ruined him?

Answer: People who ruin themselves always blame others for it.

Question: You mean he behaved rashly?

Answer: He took himself to be smarter than he really was.

Question: And he found himself up against someone who was really smart?

Answer: If you like. That's business.

Question: Afterwards he tried to borrow from his brother-in-law?

Answer: Probably.

Question: With no result?

Answer: Even a man who's very rich can't come to the help of all failures.

Question: Did you ever see him in the house?

Answer: Years ago.

Question: Where?

Answer: In Monsieur Fumal's office.

Question: What happened between them?

Answer: Monsieur Fumal threw him out.

Question: You've never seen him since then?

Answer: Once, on the pavement near the Châtelet. He was drunk.

Question: Did he speak to you?

Answer: He asked me to tell his brother-in-law that he was a swine.

Question: Did you know he sometimes slept in the house?

Answer: No.

Question: If you had known, would you have told your employer?

Answer: Probably.

Question: You're not sure?

Answer: I haven't thought it over.

Question: Did nobody speak to you about it?

Answer: People weren't keen on speaking to me.

That was true. It tallied with what the servants said. Noémi had expressed the general feeling about Monsieur Joseph in her own words:

Answer: He was in the house like a mouse in a wall. Nobody knew exactly what he did.

For the rest of the evening, too, the different notes tallied. It had been a little after half past nine when Monsieur Joseph had rung the bell. The little door in the big gate had opened and closed behind him.

Question: Why didn't you come in by the back door, since you had a key to it?

Answer: I only used that door when it was late or when I was going straight up to my own rooms.

Question: You stopped on the first floor?

Answer: Yes, I've already said so three times.

Question: Monsieur Fumal was alive then?

Answer: As much as you or me.

Question: What did you talk about?

Answer: Business.

Question: There was nobody else in the office?

Answer: Nobody.

Question: Fumal didn't tell you he was expecting a visitor?

Answer: He did.

Question: Why didn't you mention this before?

Answer: Because you didn't ask me. He was expecting Gaillardin and knew why he was coming. He was still hoping to be given more time. We decided not to give it to him.

Question: You didn't stay to be present at the conversation?

Answer: No.

Question: Why not?

Answer: Because I don't enjoy executions.

The strangest thing was that it seemed to be true. Looking at the fellow, one could sense that he was capable of every kind of dirty trick and every kind of meanness, but incapable of looking someone in the face and telling him of a fatal decision.

Question: From upstairs you must have heard Gaillardin arrive?

Answer: From upstairs one can hear nothing that goes on in the house. You try!

Question: You didn't have the curiosity to come down afterwards and find out what had happened?

Answer: I knew beforehand.

Realizing at once that two constructions could be placed on his reply, he corrected himself:

Answer: I mean I knew Monsieur Fumal would say no, that Gaillardin would implore him, talking about his wife and children, as they all do, even when they're living with a mistress, but that he would get no results.

Question: You believe he killed Fumal?

Answer: I have already said what I think.

Question: Have you quarrelled with your employer recently?

Answer: We never quarrelled.

Question: How much were you paid, Monsieur Goldman?

Answer: You have only to look at my income tax return.

Question: That is no answer.

Answer: It is the best possible.

In any case no one had seen him come downstairs again. But then, no one had seen or heard Emile Lentin come down—the first time by himself, the second time with his sister—or leave, in the end, by the back door into the Rue de Prony.

At a few minutes to ten, a taxi had stopped in the Boulevard. Gaillardin had emerged from it, paid, and rung the doorbell.

Exactly seventeen minutes later, Inspector Vacher had seen him come out again and walk off towards the Etoile, looking back now and again in the hope of finding a taxi.

Vacher had not been able to watch the back door, because he did not know of its existence.

Did not the responsibility for that rest with Maigret who had not believed in the anonymous letters and had been half-hearted in arranging for a watch to be kept?

The atmosphere in the office was thick with pipe and cigarette smoke. From time to time the inspectors exchanged sheets of paper annotated in red or blue pencil.

‘What would you say to a glass of beer, boys?’

It would take hours longer to scrutinize every sentence of the interrogations, and later on they’d have sandwiches sent up.

Telephone. Someone lifted the receiver.

‘It’s for you, Chief.’

It was Moers, who had been dealing with the finger-prints. He confirmed the fact that Lentin’s prints had been found only on the doorhandle and on the secretary’s drawer.

‘But somebody must be lying!’ exclaimed Maigret angrily.
Unless there had been no murderer, and that was impossible.

VII

A SIMPLE SUM IN ARITHMETIC AND A LESS INNOCENT WAR SOUVENIR

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maigret was feeling a relief as pervasive and sensual as that given, for instance, by a hot bath after three days and three nights in a train.

He knew he was asleep, that he was in bed, and if he put out a hand he would touch his wife’s thigh. He even knew it was the middle of the night, about two o’clock or not much later.

And yet he was dreaming. But doesn’t it sometimes happen that in dreaming one has a sudden intuition that wouldn’t have come in a waking state? Isn’t it possible, at times, for the mind to be whetted instead of lulled?

That had undoubtedly happened to him once, in his student days. He had spent the entire evening poring over a difficult problem, and suddenly, in the middle of the night, he had hit on the solution in a dream. When he woke up he couldn’t remember it at first, but in the end he had succeeded.

The same thing was happening now. If his wife had turned on the light she would doubtless have seen a mocking smile on his face.

He was laughing at himself. He’d taken the Fumal case too tragically. He had charged at it with lowered head, and that was why he hadn’t seen where it was leading him. Didn’t he know better, at his age, than to be scared of a Minister, who would perhaps have sunk back into the crowd in a week or a month from now?

He had set out on the wrong foot. He’d been aware of that from the start, from the moment when Boum-Boum had called on him in his office. And afterwards, instead of pulling himself together, smoking a quiet pipe and drinking a glass of

beer to soothe his nerves, he hadn't given himself a second's respite.

Now he'd found the solution, like that of his long-ago problem. It had come into his mind rather in the way a bubble rises to the surface of a pool, and at last he could relax.

Finished! Tomorrow morning he would do the necessary, and there would be no more Fumal case. After that he'd only have to deal with that pestilential Mrs. Britt and find her, dead or alive.

The important thing was not to lose track of his discovery. In the first place he must get it into his head clearly, not just as a fuzzy gleam. He knew what he meant by that. In one or two sentences. The only truths are short ones. Who said that? No matter. One sentence. Then wake up and ...

He opened his eyes, suddenly, in the dark room, and at once he frowned. His dream was not quite finished. He had the impression that the truth was still within his grasp.

His wife was sleeping, warm and snug, and he turned over on his back to think more easily.

There was something perfectly simple to which, during the day, he had failed to attribute its proper importance. He'd laughed when he hit on it in his dream. Why?

He struggled to recover the thread of his thoughts. He felt sure there was someone involved with whom he had been in contact several times.

And some insignificant fact. Was it actually a fact? Or some material clue?

The relaxed mood induced by his dream was now followed by a state of tension almost physically painful. He persisted, forcing himself to envisage the house in the Boulevard de Courcelles from top to bottom, with everyone who lived in it or had come there.

He and his inspectors had stayed at the Quai des Orfèvres until ten o'clock that night, working on the statements till in the end they had known by heart even the most trivial remarks, which ran through their heads like the chorus of some song.

Was it in the documents? Was it something to do with Louise Bourges and Felix?

He was inclined to believe so, and hunted in that direction. There was no proof that it had not been the secretary who wrote the anonymous letters. Maigret had not asked her how much she earned with Fumal. She was probably not paid more than the average secretary perhaps less.

She was Felix's mistress and admitted it quite openly, but made a point of adding:

'We're engaged, as well.'

The chauffeur said the same thing.

'When do you intend to get married?'

'When we've put aside enough money to buy an inn at Giens.'

People don't speak of being engaged when they don't intend to get married for another ten or fifteen years.

As he lay in bed, Maigret did some mental arithmetic. Assuming Louise and Felix spent no more than the strict minimum on their clothes and small expenses—even assuming they saved every penny of their wages—it would be at least ten years before they could buy even the smallest business.

That was not what he'd hit upon just now in his sleep, but all the same it was a point worth bearing in mind.

One or other of them must have some means of getting money more quickly; and since they remained in Fumal's household in spite of their dislike for it, it must be from Fumal they expected to get it.

Fumal had humiliated his secretary, treating her in the most revolting manner.

She had not mentioned this either to Maigret or to the inspectors.

Had she admitted it to Felix? Had the latter kept cool after being told that his mistress had been compelled to strip and, once naked, been told to dress herself again, after a disdainful gesture?

It wasn't that, either. It was something of that kind, but more illuminating.

Maigret felt tempted to go to sleep again and try to recapture his dream, but he couldn't get back to sleep now, his brain was revolving like clockwork.

There was another detail, more recent ... He almost clenched his teeth in the effort to recall it, to concentrate harder, and suddenly he saw Emile Lentin again in his office, seemed to be hearing his voice. What had Lentin said with reference to Louise Bourges? He had not been speaking directly about her, but about something to do with her.

He had admitted ...

That was it! Maigret was getting somewhere, in spite of everything. Emile Lentin had said that he sometimes went down, in stocking feet, to the office, to take money out of the petty cash—a few hundred-franc pieces each time, he had specified.

Now that money was kept in Louise's desk drawer. She was responsible for it. No doubt she entered her expenditure in a note book, as is done almost everywhere.

According to Lentin this pilfering had been repeated frequently.

Yet she had never mentioned it. Was it credible that she had been unaware of it, had never noticed that her accounts didn't balance?

So there were two points on which, if she had not actually lied, she had kept silent.

Why hadn't it worried her to find that money was disappearing from her drawer?

Was it because she was taking some herself and her accounts were all eyewash in any case?

Or because she knew who was committing the thefts and had her own reasons for saying nothing?

He felt the need of a pipe and got up noiselessly, taking nearly two minutes to slip out of bed and creep over to the chest of

drawers. Madame Maigret sighed and stirred but did not wake, and he only allowed the match to flare up for a second, shielding it with his hand.

Seated in the arm-chair, he went on with his search.

Though he had still not recaptured the solution he'd dreamt about, he had made some progress. Where had he got to? The thefts from the drawer. If Louise Bourges knew who was coming to her office at night ...

He thought himself back into that office, where he had spent part of the previous day. Two large windows overlooked the courtyard. Across the yard were the former stables and above them were, not the two or three servants' rooms found in some places of the kind, but two proper storeys, making an independent house.

He had been through those rooms. The secretary's bedroom, where Felix used to join her, was on the right hand side of the second floor, just opposite the office and at a slightly higher level.

He tried to remember the wording of the earliest reports, especially that of Lapointe, who had been first on the scene. Had anything been said about curtains?

The Superintendent could see the windows clearly in his mind's eye; thin muslin curtains were drawn across them, veiling the strong daylight, but they would not be enough, at night, to conceal what went on in the lighted room.

There were other curtains, Empire red in colour. Had they been drawn or pulled back when Lapointe arrived?

Maigret almost rang up Lapointe at home, to ask him this question, which all at once seemed to him supremely important. If those curtains were not habitually drawn, Louise and Felix knew everything that went on in that office.

Did that lead anywhere?

Was he to conclude that they had watched the previous night's drama from their room and knew who was the murderer?

In one corner stood a safe, over three feet high, which was not to be opened until tomorrow, because it could only be done in the presence of the examining magistrate and of Fumal's lawyer.

What did Fumal keep in that safe? No will had been found among his papers. They had telephoned to the lawyer, Maître Audoin, but he did not know of any will.

Maigret, sitting motionless in the dark, went on racking his brains in this direction, with the impression that it was still not the right one. The revelation that had come to him just now, in his dream, had been more complete—a dazzling flash.

Lentin had often gone down to the office, sometimes when Fumal was asleep in his bedroom ...

That, too, might open fresh prospects. True, there was one room between the office and the bedroom, to act as a buffer. But Fumal was a man who distrusted everybody and had good reason for doing so.

Lentin's thefts had gone on for years. Wasn't it plausible that on one or more occasions the ex-butcher had heard sounds?

He was physically a coward, Maigret knew that. He'd already been one at school; he used to play mean tricks on the other boys, and when they rounded on him he'd wail:

'Don't hit me!'

Or, more often still, he would run to the schoolmistress for protection.

Suppose Lentin had gone down on one of his pilfering expeditions, ten days or so ago ...

Suppose Fumal had heard sounds ...

Maigret could imagine the king of the meat market clutching his revolver and not daring to go and see what was happening.

If, as was possible, he didn't know that his brother-in-law was in the house, he must have suspected everybody, including Monsieur Joseph, his secretary and perhaps his wife.

Had he thought of the petty cash? That would almost have amounted to second sight.

Why should some unknown person have come into his office? And wasn't that person going to open the bedroom door? ...

It all held together. It wasn't the dream, as yet, but it was another step forward. For it might explain why Fumal had begun to write anonymous letters, as an excuse for applying to the police.

He could have done it without that. But then he would have been confessing to the state of terror in which he was living.

Madame Maigret stirred, pushed off the bedclothes and suddenly called out:

'Where are you?'

From the depths of his arm-chair he answered:

'Here.'

What are you doing?'

'Smoking a pipe. I couldn't sleep.'

'Haven't you been to sleep yet? What time is it?'

He switched on the light. The alarm clock said ten minutes past three. He knocked out his pipe and got back into bed, unsatisfied, still hoping, with no great confidence, that he would recover the thread of his dream; and he did not wake up again until he smelt freshly-made coffee. What surprised him at once was to see the sun, a real slice of sunshine, coming into the room for the first time for at least a fortnight.

'You weren't walking in your sleep last night?'

'No.'

'You remember you were sitting in the dark and smoking your pipe?'

'Yes.'

He remembered everything, all the argument he had held with himself—but not his dream, alas! He dressed, breakfasted, and

walked to the Place de la République to catch his bus, buying the morning papers at a stand on the way.

The faces around him were cheerful, because of the sunshine. The air had already lost its damp, dusty tang. The sky was pale blue. The pavements and roofs were dry, only the trunks of the trees were still wet.

Fumal, king of the meat market.

The morning papers recapitulated what the evening ones had said, with further details and fresh photographs, including one of Maigret leaving the house in the Boulevard de Courcelles with his hat pulled down over his eyes and a surly expression on his face.

He was struck by one of the sub-headings:

Fumal said to have asked for police protection on the day he died.

There had been a leakage somewhere. Did it come from the Ministry, where several people must have known about the butcher's telephone call? Did it come from Louise Bourges, who had been questioned by the reporters?

The indiscretion could equally well have been committed, even unintentionally, by one of his inspectors.

A few hours previous to his tragic death, Ferdinand Fumal visited the Quai des Orfèvres, where, it is believed, he informed Superintendent Maigret of the serious threats he is understood to have received. We have reason to suppose that at the very hour when he was shot down in his office, an inspector from the Judicial Police was on guard in the Boulevard de Courcelles.

The Minister was not mentioned, but it was hinted that Fumal had acquired tremendous political influence.

Maigret went slowly up the wide staircase and raised a hand in greeting to Joseph; he expected the latter to announce that the Chief wanted to see him, but Joseph made no sign.

On his desk several reports lay waiting, but he only glanced at them.

The pathologist's report confirmed what he knew already. Fumal had definitely been killed at point-blank range. The gun had been less than eight inches from his body when the shot was fired. The bullet had been found in his chest.

The ballistics expert who had examined the bullet was equally specific. It had been fired from a Luger automatic such as German officers carried during the last war.

A telegram from Monte Carlo was about Mrs. Britt: it was not she who had been seen at the tables, but a Dutchwoman who looked rather like her.

The bell for the conference rang down the corridor and Maigret set out, with a sigh, for the Chief's office, where he shook hands absent-mindedly with those of his colleagues who were assembled there.

As he had expected, he was the centre of attention. The others knew better than anyone else what an awkward position he was in, and had a tactful way of showing that they sympathized with him.

The Director, for his part, pretended to treat the matter lightly, with optimism.

'Nothing new, Maigret?'

'The investigation is going ahead.'

'You've seen the papers?'

'I've just been glancing over them. They won't be satisfied till I make an arrest.'

The Press would be hard at his heels. This case, added to the mystery of the Englishwoman's disappearance in the heart of Paris, was not calculated to enhance the prestige of the Judicial Police.

'I'm doing my best,' he added with a sigh.

'Any clues?'

He shrugged his shoulders. Could one call them clues? Each of the other men spoke of the case he had in hand, and when the

meeting broke up they glanced at him with what looked like commiseration.

The expert from the Finance Department was waiting for him in his office. Maigret listened to him with only half an ear, for he was still trying to recapture his dream,

Fumal's business had been even more extensive than the newspapers imagined. In the course of a few years he had built up what was almost a monopoly in the meat-market.

'Behind these transactions there's somebody who's diabolically clever,' declared the expert, 'and who has considerable knowledge of the law. It'll take months to unravel the tangled skein of companies and subsidiaries that leads up to Fumal. The Internal Revenue will certainly be looking into the matter as well...'

The clever brain was probably Monsieur Joseph's, for although Fumal had amassed an impressive fortune before making his acquaintance, he had never done business on such a scale.

Let the Finance Department of the Public Prosecutor's Office deal with all that, and the Internal Revenue too, if they wanted to.

What concerned him was to discover who had killed Fumal, at point-blank range, in his office, while Vacher was walking up and down outside the house.

He was wanted on the telephone. Someone was insisting on speaking to him personally. It was Madame Gaillardin, the real one, who lived at Neuilly; she was calling from Cannes, where she was still staying with her children. She wanted details. She said one of the Riviera newspapers had announced that Gaillardin, after killing Fumal at his house in the Boulevard de Courcelles, had gone to Puteaux and committed suicide.

'I telephoned my solicitor this morning. I shall return to Paris by the Mistral today. I want to make it clear to you at once that the woman in the Rue François Premier has no rights whatsoever, that there was never any question of a divorce between my husband and myself, and that we were married

under the system of joint property. Fumal robbed him, there's no doubt about that. My lawyer will prove it and claim from the estate whatever sums ...'

Maigret sighed, holding the receiver to his ear and murmuring from time to time:

'Yes, Madame... Very well, Madame ...'

Finally he asked her:

'Tell me, did your husband possess a Luger?'

'A what?'

'Nothing. Was he in the last war?'

'He was exempted from service because ...'

'Never mind why. He was never a prisoner, or deported to Germany?'

'No. Why?'

'No special reason. You've never seen a revolver in your flat at Neuilly?'

'There used to be one, but he took it when he went to that ... that ...'

'Thank you.'

That woman wouldn't let herself be pushed around. She'd fight like a she-wolf defending her cubs.

He went into the inspectors' office and looked round for a particular one.

'Lapointe's not here?'

'He must be in the washroom.'

He waited.

'Aillevard still away?'

Lapointe came back after a time and blushed at finding Maigret waiting for him.

'Tell me, my boy ... Yesterday morning, when you went into that office ... Think carefully ... Were the curtains drawn or

pulled back?’

They were just as you found them. I didn’t touch them and I didn’t see anyone else touch them.’

‘That is to say they were pulled back?’

“Yes. I could swear they were. Wait a minute! Yes, definitely, because I noticed the old stables across the yard and ...’

‘Come with me.’

It was his custom, during an investigation, to take someone with him nearly always. On the way, in the little black car, he scarcely opened his mouth. In the Boulevard de Courcelles it was he who pressed the brass bell, and Victor came and opened the door in the big gate.

Maigret noticed that he had not shaved, which made him look much more like a poacher than a valet or a concierge.

‘Is the inspector upstairs?’

‘Yes. They took him up some coffee and rolls.’

‘Who did?’

‘Noémi.’

‘Has Monsieur Joseph come down?’

‘I haven’t seen him.’

‘And Mademoiselle Louise?’

‘She was in the kitchen, having breakfast, half an hour ago. I don’t know if she’s gone upstairs.’

‘Felix?’

‘In the garage.’

Taking a few steps forward, Maigret saw the man right enough, polishing one of the cars as though nothing had happened.

‘The lawyer’s not here?’

‘I didn’t even know he was supposed to be coming.’

‘I’m expecting the examining magistrate, too. Show them up to the office when they come.’

‘Very good, Superintendent.’

Maigret had a question at the tip of his tongue, but when he was about to ask it, it eluded him. In any case it couldn’t be important.

On the first floor they found Inspector Janin, who had been on guard for the latter part of the night. He, too, was unshaven, and could scarcely keep awake.

‘Nothing’s happened?’

‘Nobody moved. The young lady came in just now to ask if I needed her. I told her I didn’t, and after a few minutes she went away, saying she’d be in her room and could always be sent for.’

‘Did she go into the office?’

‘Yes. She only stayed there for a few seconds.’

‘Did she open any drawers?’

‘I don’t think so. She came out carrying some red knitted garment she had had when she arrived.’

Maigret remembered that on the previous day she had been wearing a red cardigan. She had probably left it in one of the first-floor rooms by mistake.

‘Madame Fumal?’

‘Her breakfast was taken up on a tray.’

‘She’s not been down?’

‘I haven’t seen her.’

‘Go and get to bed now. There’ll be time enough this evening to write out your report.’

The red curtains in the office were still not drawn. Maigret told Lapointe to go and ask the maids if they usually were. He himself looked out of one of the windows. Just opposite, at a slightly higher level, a window was open and a fair-haired young woman could be seen going to and fro, her lips moving

as though she were singing softly while tidying the room. It was Louise Bourges.

Struck by an idea, he turned to the safe that stood against the wall opposite the windows. Could that be seen from across the yard?

If it could ... The idea excited him and he went downstairs, into the courtyard, and up the narrower stairs that led to the secretary's room. He knocked. She said:

'Come in!'

She did not seem surprised to see him, but only said softly:

'It's you!'

He already knew the room, which was a good size and prettily furnished, with a radio on a small table and a bedside lamp with an orange shade. It was the window that interested him. He leant out, his eyes searching the shadows of the office, opposite. He had not thought to turn on the lights before leaving it.

Would you go and switch on the lights, over there?'

Where?'

'In the office.'

She gave no sign of alarm or surprise.

'One moment ... Do you know what there is in your employer's safe?'

She hesitated, but not for long.

'Yes. I'd rather tell the truth.'

What?'

'A few important files, for one thing, and then Madame Fumal's jewels, some letters I know nothing about; and money.'

'A lot of money?'

'Yes, a lot. You must realize why he had to keep large sums in banknotes on hand. In his business deals there was nearly

always a sum that passed “under the counter”, a certain amount he couldn’t pay by cheque.’

‘How much, in your opinion?’

I’ve often seen him pay out two or three million francs from hand to hand. He had notes in his safe deposit at the bank, too.’

‘So there may well be several million francs in cash in the safe?’

‘Unless he took it out.’

‘When?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Go and turn on the lights.’

‘Shall I come back here?’

‘Wait for me over there.’

Louise’s own room had been searched without result. It contained no Luger, no compromising papers and no money, except for three one-thousand franc notes and a few hundred-franc pieces.

The young woman crossed the courtyard. It seemed to Maigret that she took a long time to reach the office on the first floor, but she might have met someone on the way.

At last the lights were turned on, and immediately, through the muslin-veiled windows, the smallest details of the room became visible, including the left-hand portion of the safe, though not the whole of it.

He tried to fix the spot where Fumal had been standing when he was killed, but it was hard to do so with certainty, because the body might have rolled over.

Had it been possible to witness the scene from Louise Bourges’s window? That was not certain. What was definite was that anyone coming into the office or going out would be clearly visible.

He crossed the courtyard in his turn and went upstairs without seeing anybody. Louise was waiting for him on the landing.

‘Have you found out what you wanted to know?’

He nodded. She followed him into the room.

‘You’ll notice that from here nearly the whole of my room can be seen, in the same way.’

He pricked up his ears.

‘If Monsieur Fumal didn’t always draw the curtains in the office, Felix and I had the best reasons for closing our shutters. Because over there the windows have shutters. We’re not exhibitionists, either of us.’

‘So he sometimes drew the curtains and sometimes didn’t?’

‘Precisely. For instance, when he worked late with Monsieur Joseph he always drew them. I sometimes wondered why. I suppose it was because on those evenings he had to open the safe.’

‘Do you think Monsieur Joseph knew the combination?’

‘I doubt it.’

‘And you?’

‘I certainly don’t.’

‘Lapointe! ... Go upstairs to Monsieur Joseph and ask him whether he knows the combination of the safe.’

The key of the safe had been found in the dead man’s pocket. Madame Fumal, questioned the day before, knew nothing about it. The lawyer declared that he did not know the combination either, so that they were waiting, this morning, not only for the examining magistrate but for an expert sent from the firm that made the safe.

‘You’re not pregnant?’ Maigret queried abruptly.

‘Why do you ask me that? No, I’m not.’

Steps were heard on the stairs. It was the man from the safe-makers, a tall thin fellow with a moustache, who looked at the

safe immediately, like a surgeon looking at the patient he is about to operate on.

‘We must wait for the magistrate and the lawyer.’

‘I know. I’m used to this.’

When the two arrived, the lawyer asked for Madame Fumal, the presumptive legatee, to be present, and Lapointe, who had come downstairs again, went to fetch her.

She was not as drunk as the day before, only a little dazed, and she must have swallowed a gulp of spirits before coming down, to give herself courage, for her breath reeked of it.

The lawyer’s clerk had taken his seat at the desk.

‘I don’t think there is any reason for you to remain here, Mademoiselle Bourges,’ said Maigret, noticing that the secretary was still in the room.

He was to regret those words!

He and Planche, the examining magistrate, began chatting in the window while the expert set to work. Half an hour went by, then there was a click and they saw the heavy door swing open.

The lawyer was the first to approach and look in. The magistrate and Maigret stood behind him.

A few yellow, bulging envelopes contained only receipts and letters, more especially ious bearing different signatures.

On another shelf were stacked files relating to Fumal’s various businesses.

There was no money, not a single banknote.

Sensing a presence at his back, Maigret turned round. Monsieur Joseph was standing in the doorway.

‘Is it there?’ he asked.

‘What?’

‘The fifteen million. There ought to be fifteen million francs in cash in the safe. It was still there three days ago, and I’m sure Monsieur Fumal didn’t take it out.’

‘You have a key?’

‘I have just told your inspector that I have not.’

‘Has nobody a duplicate key to the safe?’

‘Not to my knowledge.’

As he strode to and froze, Maigret found himself facing the window; opposite, he caught sight of Louise Bourges, back in her own room and singing to herself, as though indifferent to what was going on in the house.

VIII

THE WINDOW, THE SAFE, THE LOCK AND THE THIEF

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it is said that even the longest dream lasts, in reality, only a few seconds. At that moment, Maigret had an experience which reminded him, not of his last night's dream, which he had still not recaptured, but of the sense of discovery he had had then, the kind of sudden leap forward to a truth he had long been seeking.

Later—so full-packed were those few seconds of life—he could reconstitute his slightest thoughts, his slightest sensations, and had he been a painter he could have depicted the scene as meticulously as a minor Flemish master.

The light from the lamps combined with the sunlight to give the room an artificial appearance that was reminiscent of a stage scene, and perhaps because of this, the persons present all seemed to be acting a part.

The Superintendent was still standing at one of the two tall windows. Opposite, across the courtyard, Louise Bourges was moving about and singing in her room, her fair hair showing pale against the dim background. Below, in the courtyard, Felix, in blue overalls, was turning the stream of water from a hose-pipe on the limousine he had brought out of the garage.

The lawyer's clerk, sitting at the late Ferdinand Fumal's desk, was waiting, head raised, for something to be dictated to him. The lawyer, Audoin, and the examining magistrate, Planche, stood not far from the safe, looking first at its steel bulk and then at Maigret, and the lawyer was still holding a file.

The safe expert had tactfully withdrawn into a corner, and Monsieur Joseph had advanced only two paces into the room; the door was open and young Lapointe could be seen out on the landing, lighting a cigarette.

It was as though for a few seconds life had come to a standstill, everyone holding a pose as if in front of a camera.

Maigret's eyes travelled from the window opposite to the safe and from the safe to the door, and at last he realized the mistake he had made. The door was an old one, of carved oak, with a big lock, made to take a large key.

'Lapointe!' he called.

'Yes, Chief.'

'Go down and fetch Victor.'

Lapointe didn't understand the warning either, and now it was to the safe expert that the Superintendent turned with a question.

'If somebody, watching through that keyhole, had seen Fumal open his safe a certain number of times, and watched his movements carefully, would it have been possible for him to discover the combination?'

The man looked at the door himself, apparently calculating the angle and estimating the distance.

'For me, it would be child's play,' he said.

'And for a man who's not a professional?'

With patience ... Following the movements of the hand, and counting the number of times each dial was turned ...'

They could hear footsteps going to and fro downstairs, and then, from the courtyard, came Lapointe's voice, asking Felix:

'You haven't seen Victor?'

Maigret was sure he had hit upon the truth just now, but at the same time he felt convinced it was too late. Louise Bourges, across the yard, leant out of her window, and he thought he saw a faint smile on her face.

Lapointe came upstairs again, bewildered.

'I can't find him anywhere, Chief. He's not in the lodge, or anywhere else on the ground floor. He's not gone upstairs, either. Felix says he heard the street door open and close again, a few moments ago.'

‘Ring up the Quai. Give them a description of him. Tell them to send out an urgent call to all railway stations and police stations. Telephone the nearest police stations yourself ...’

The man-hunt was beginning and there was no need of innovations there. The radio cars would cruise round the district in steadily narrowing circles. Uniform police and plain-clothes detectives would search the streets, going into the bistros and questioning people.

‘Do you know how he’s dressed?’

Maigret and his inspectors had only seen the man in a striped waist-coat. It was Monsieur Joseph who came to the rescue, observing with an air of repugnance:

‘So far as I know he has only one suit, a navy blue.’

‘What sort of hat?’

‘He has never worn a hat.’

When Maigret had asked Lapointe to go down and fetch Victor, he had not yet been by any means certain. Was it a case of intuition? Or was it the culmination of a vast number of arguments he had held with himself unawares, innumerable observations which, taken separately, were of no importance?

From the outset he had felt convinced that Fumal had been killed out of hatred, for revenge.

Didn’t Victor’s flight contradict this, or even the fact that fifteen million francs had vanished from the safe? He felt like retorting to himself:

‘On the contrary!’

Perhaps because this was a peasant’s hatred, and a peasant rarely forgets his own interests, even if driven by passion.

The Superintendent said nothing. The others were looking at him. He felt humiliated, because for him this was a set-back; he had spent too long in beating about the bush, and now he had little confidence in the hunt that was being organized.

‘Gentlemen, I need not keep you any longer. If you would like to dispose of the formalities ...’

The examining magistrate, who was only a tyro, was afraid to ask questions. He only ventured to murmur:

‘You believe it was he?’

‘I’m sure it was.’

‘And he’s gone off with the millions?’

It was more than probable. Either Victor had gone off with the money or he had hidden it somewhere outside the house and would be going to fetch it.

Lapointe’s monotonous voice was repeating the description over the telephone and the Superintendent went heavily down to the courtyard, pausing for a moment to watch Felix, who was still cleaning the car.

Passing the man without speaking to him, Maigret went upstairs and opened the door of Louise Bourges’s room.

Louise’s eyes were still full of mischief, and a deep satisfaction as well.

‘You knew?’ he asked simply.

She made no attempt to deny it. On the contrary, she retorted with:

‘Confess it was I you suspected?’

He made no denial either, but sat down on the edge of the bed and slowly filled his pipe.

‘How did you realize?’ he resumed. ‘You saw him?’

He pointed to the window.

‘No. Just now, I told you the truth. I always tell the truth. I’m incapable of lying, not because I hate lies, but because I blush.’

‘You really used to close the shutters?’

‘Always. But I’ve sometimes come across Victor in parts of the house where he ought not to have been. He had a way of walking without making a sound, moving without stirring the air. Several times I’ve jumped when I found he was close to me.’

He walked like a poacher, of course! Maigret had thought of that, too, all of a sudden—but too late, while he was glancing from the safe to the door and back again.

The secretary pointed to a bell in a corner of her room.

‘You see that? It was put in so that Monsieur Fumal could call me whenever he wanted. It sometimes happened in the evening, even quite late. I’d be obliged to get dressed and go to him because he had some urgent work to give me, especially after a business dinner. It was on those occasions that I sometimes caught Victor on the stairs.’

‘He didn’t offer you any explanation of his presence?’

‘No. He just looked at me in a particular way.’

‘How?’

‘You know.’

That was true. Maigret had probably understood everything, but he wanted it put into words.

‘There was a sort of tacit complicity in the house. Nobody liked the boss. Each of us had some secret or other.’

‘You even had one from Felix.’

He had evidence that she blushed easily, for she reddened to the ears.

‘What are you talking about?’

‘The evening when Fumal made you undress ...’

She went over to the window and closed it.

‘Have you mentioned that to Felix?’

‘No.’

‘Will you tell him about it?’

‘Why should I? I merely wonder why you put up with it.’

‘Because I want us to get married.’

‘And to set up at Giens!’

‘What’s wrong about that?’

What was she keenest about, what did she put first, marriage to Felix, or the ownership of an inn on the Loire?

‘How were you getting the money?’

Emile Lentin took it from the petty cash. She, too, must have her system.

‘I may as well tell you, for there’s nothing illegal about it.’

‘Go ahead.’

‘The director of “Northern Butchers” was interested in knowing certain figures that went through my hands, because that way he could make big private profits. It would take too long to explain to you. As soon as I had the figures I’d wire them to him, and every month he gave me quite a substantial sum.’

‘And the other managers?’

‘I feel sure all of them were feathering their own nests, but they didn’t need my co-operation.’

So Fumal, the most suspicious of men and the toughest in business dealings, had been entirely surrounded by people who were tricking him. He spied on them, spent his whole life watching them and threatening them, making them feel the weight of his authority.

Yet in his own house a man used to come and sleep several nights a week without his knowledge, going in and out, eating at his expense, and not even hesitating, on some nights, to come close up to the room where he lay asleep, to take money from the petty cash.

His secretary was hand in glove with one of his managers.

Hadn’t Monsieur Joseph, too, made a little nest-egg for himself? Probably that would never be known—even the experts of the Finance Department might be baffled.

To make sure of having a bodyguard, a faithful watchdog, Fumal had saved a poacher in his native village from life imprisonment. Hadn’t he sent for him, too, to come to his office sometimes of an evening, and given him confidential tasks?

And yet, of all of them, Victor was the one who hated him most. With a peasant's hatred, patient and tenacious, the same that in his poaching days he had so long nourished for the game-keeper he had finally shot dead when the opportunity presented itself.

In Fumal's case, too, Victor had waited for an opportunity. Not only an opportunity to kill him, for that came every day. Not only an opportunity to kill him without being found out; but an opportunity to relieve himself from want at the same time.

Hadn't it been partly the sight of the empty safe, the absence of the fifteen million francs, that had suddenly put Maigret on the track?

He would analyse all that later. The particulars were still jumbled in his mind.

The Luger had played a role too.

'Was Victor in the war?'

'At a military base near Moulins.'

'Where was he during the occupation?'

'In his village.'

The village had been occupied by the Germans. It would have been just like Victor, too, to have got hold of one of their weapons when they retreated. He might even have several hidden in the woods.

'Why did you warn him?' Maigret inquired reproachfully.

'Warn him of what?'

She blushed again, realized it, and this disarmed her.

'I spoke to him on my way down. He was standing at the foot of the stairs, looking worried.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. Perhaps because the safe was being opened? Perhaps because he'd heard you or one of your men make some remark that suggested you were on his track.'

What did you say to him, exactly?'

‘I said: “You’d better clear out”.’

‘Why?’

‘Because he’d done everybody a good turn by killing Fumal.’

She seemed to be defying him to contradict her.

‘Besides, I felt you’d be getting at the truth. Afterwards it might perhaps have been too late.’

‘Admit you were beginning to feel scared.’

‘You were suspecting us, Felix and me. And Felix used to have a Luger too. He was in the occupation forces in Germany. When he showed the thing to me—he’d kept it as a souvenir—I insisted on his getting rid of it.’

‘How long ago was this?’

‘A year.’

‘For what reason?’

‘Because he’s jealous, he has fits of rage, and I was afraid that in one of them he might shoot me.’

She was not blushing. She was telling the truth.

Every police station in Paris was on the alert. Police cars were combing the district, pedestrians were scrutinized as they went along the pavements, and the proprietors of bars and restaurants were being visited by gentlemen who bent towards them to put questions in an undertone.

‘Can Victor drive a car?’

‘I don’t think so.’

They watched the roads, all the same. For a long way out of Paris the local police set up roadblocks and inspected the occupants of all passing cars.

Maigret felt useless. He had done what it was in his power to do. The rest didn’t depend on him.

The rest, in point of fact, depended more on chance than on the ability of the police.

It was a matter of finding one man among several million others, and he a man who was determined not to be caught.

Maigret had bungled it. He had got there too late. As he went towards the door, Louise Bourges asked him:

‘Do we still have to remain here?’

‘For the time being. There will be some other formalities to attend to, and perhaps some questions to put to each of you.’

In the courtyard Felix stared after him mistrustfully and went upstairs at once to join the girl. Was he going to make a jealous scene because she’d spent some time alone with the Superintendent?

The latter walked out of the house and made for the nearest bistro, the first along the Boulevard des Batignolles, where he had taken refuge once already.

‘A pint of beer?’ inquired the proprietor, who had a good memory.

He shook his head. Today he didn’t want beer. The bar smelt of marc de Bourgogne, and in spite of the early hour, he ordered:

‘A marc.’

Afterwards, he called for another and later, thinking of other things, for a third.

It was curious that this drama should have begun at Saint-Fiacre, the tiny village in the Allier where Ferdinand Fumal and he had both been born.

Maigret had come into the world at the Château, or rather in a house on the estate, of which his father was bailiff.

Fumal had been born in a butcher’s shop, and his mother had worn no drawers, so as not to keep the men waiting.

As for Victor, he had been born in a wooden hut and his father used to eat crows and carrion.

Was that what gave the Superintendent the impression that he understood them?

Did he really want the man-hunt to succeed and the ex-poacher to go to the scaffold?

His thoughts were formless. They were more like a succession of pictures that followed one another while he stared at the tarnished mirror behind the bottles in the bar.

Fumal had been aggressive with the Superintendent because, in the old days when they were at school, he had looked upon Maigret as the son of the bailiff, an educated gentleman who represented the Count in dealing with the peasants.

Victor, for his part, must have regarded as his enemies all those who did not range the woods as he did—all who lived in proper houses and were not openly at loggerheads with the police and the gamekeepers.

Fumal had made the mistake of bringing him to Paris and shutting him up in that big stone box in the Boulevard de Courcelles.

Hadn't Victor felt like a prisoner there? In his lodge, where he lived alone like a beast in its lair, hadn't he dreamt about the morning dew and about snaring game?

Here he had no gun such as he'd carried in his woodlands, but he had brought his Luger with him and he must at times have patted it nostalgically.

'The same again, patron.'

But he shook his head directly afterwards.

'No!'

He didn't want to drink any more. He didn't need to. He must finish the job he had begun, even if he didn't believe in it; he must go to his office on the Quai des Orfèvres and direct the search.

Not to mention the fact that there was still an Englishwoman to be found!

IX

THE SEARCH FOR THE VANISHED

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the newspaper headline that best summed up the situation was:

‘Double failure for the judicial Police.’

Which implied:

‘Double failure for Maigret.’

A tourist had vanished from her hotel in the Saint-Lazare district for no apparent reason, had gone into a bar, come out again, walked past a police sergeant and disappeared into thin air.

A man of whom a detailed description had been given, a man who had murdered not only the king of the meat market but a gamekeeper as well, had left a private house in the Boulevard de Courcelles, in broad daylight, at eleven o’clock in the morning, when the house was occupied by the police and the examining magistrate was there too. Perhaps he was armed. He must be carrying on him a fortune of fifteen million francs.

He was not known to have any friends in Paris, any contacts, whether male or female.

Yet, like Mrs. Britt, he had vanished into the city.

Hundreds and thousands of police and gendarmes, all over the country, spent an incalculable number of hours searching for both these people.

Public excitement died away in due course, but the men responsible for the safety of the population still had two names and descriptions, among others, in their notebooks.

For two years there was no news of either the woman or the man.

It was Mrs. Britt, the

Kilburn Lane

boarding-house proprietress, who was found first, in perfect health, married, and running a boarding-house in a mining camp in Australia.

Credit for finding her was due neither to the French police nor to the British, but, by the sheerest coincidence, to someone who had been in her party on the Paris visit and who afterwards chanced to visit Australia.

Mrs. Britt offered no explanation. There were no grounds for demanding one from her. How and where had she at last met the man of her life? Why had she left the hotel, and then France itself, without a word to a soul? That was her affair, and when reporters called to question her, she showed them the door.

With Victor, matters were different. His disappearance lasted longer, too, for it continued for five years, though his name still appeared in the notebooks of the police and the gendarmes.

One November morning a passenger-carrying cargo boat arrived at Cherbourg from Panama, and among the passengers who landed from it the harbour police noticed a third-class passenger who looked ill and whose passport was a clumsy fake.

‘Will you come this way please?’ one of the two detectives asked politely after glancing at his companion.

‘Why?’

‘Just a formality.’

Instead of following the others, the man went into an office where he was asked to sit down.

‘What’s your name?’

‘You’ve seen it—Henri Sauer.’

‘Born at Strasbourg?’

‘It’s on my passport.’

‘Where did you go to school?’

‘At Strasbourg, naturally.’

‘To the school on the Quai Saint-Nicolas?’

They went on to name several streets, squares, hotels and restaurants.

‘It’s so long ago,’ the man sighed, his face now bathed in sweat.

He must have caught some fever in the tropics, for his body suddenly began to tremble convulsively.

‘Your name?’

‘I’ve told you.’

‘Your real name.’

In spite of his condition, he didn’t give in, but went on repeating the same story over and over again.

‘I know where you went in Panama to buy that passport. Only, you see, you were had. One can see you didn’t go to school for very long. It’s the clumsiest possible forgery and you’re at least the tenth person to get yourself caught.’

The policeman went to a filing-cabinet and brought out several similar passports.

‘Look. The name of the bloke who sold it to you at Panama is Schwartz, and he’s an ex-convict. He really was born at Strasbourg. Not going to talk? Just as you like! ... Let’s have your thumb ...’

Placidly, the policeman took the suspect’s fingerprints.

‘What are you going to do with them?’

‘Send ‘em to Paris, where they’ll know at once who you are.’

‘And in the meantime?’

‘We shall keep you here, naturally.’

The man looked at the glass-panelled door beyond which other policemen were chatting together.

‘In that case...’ he sighed, defeated.

‘Your name?’

‘Victor Ricou.’

Even after five years that was enough to make the penny drop. The inspector got up, went over to the filing-cabinets again, and finally picked out a card.

‘Victor of the Boulevard de Courcelles?’

Five minutes later Maigret, who had just arrived in his office and was looking through his letters, heard this news by telephone.

Next morning, in the same office, he had before him a kind of wreck, a disheartened creature who had no more thought of defending himself.

‘How did you get away from Paris?’

‘I didn’t. I stayed for three months.’

‘Where?’

‘In a small hotel in the Place d’Italie.’

What puzzled the Superintendent was how Victor, with only a few minutes’ start, had got out of the district, although the police had been warned at once.

‘I took an errand-boy’s bicycle that was standing at the curb and nobody took any notice of me.’

After three months he had made his way to Le Havre, where he had stowed away, abetted by a member of the crew, aboard a cargo boat bound for Panama.

‘He began by telling me it would cost me five hundred thousand francs. On board, he asked me for another five hundred thousand. Then, before going ashore ...’

‘How much did he take off you altogether?’

‘Two million. On the other side ...’

Victor had planned to settle in the country, but there was no real country, the virgin forest began almost as soon as one was out of the town.

Feeling homesick, he had spent his time in shady bars, and been robbed again. His fifteen million hadn’t lasted more than two years, and he had been obliged to start working.

‘I couldn’t stick it any longer. I had to come back... .’

The newspapers, which had made such a fuss about him, gave a bare three lines to the news of his arrest, for everyone had forgotten the Fumal case.

Victor never even came up for trial. As the preliminaries were long-drawn-out, because the witnesses had all disappeared, he had time to die in the prison hospital at Fresnes, where Maigret was the only person who went to see him, two or three times.

—March 4, 1956